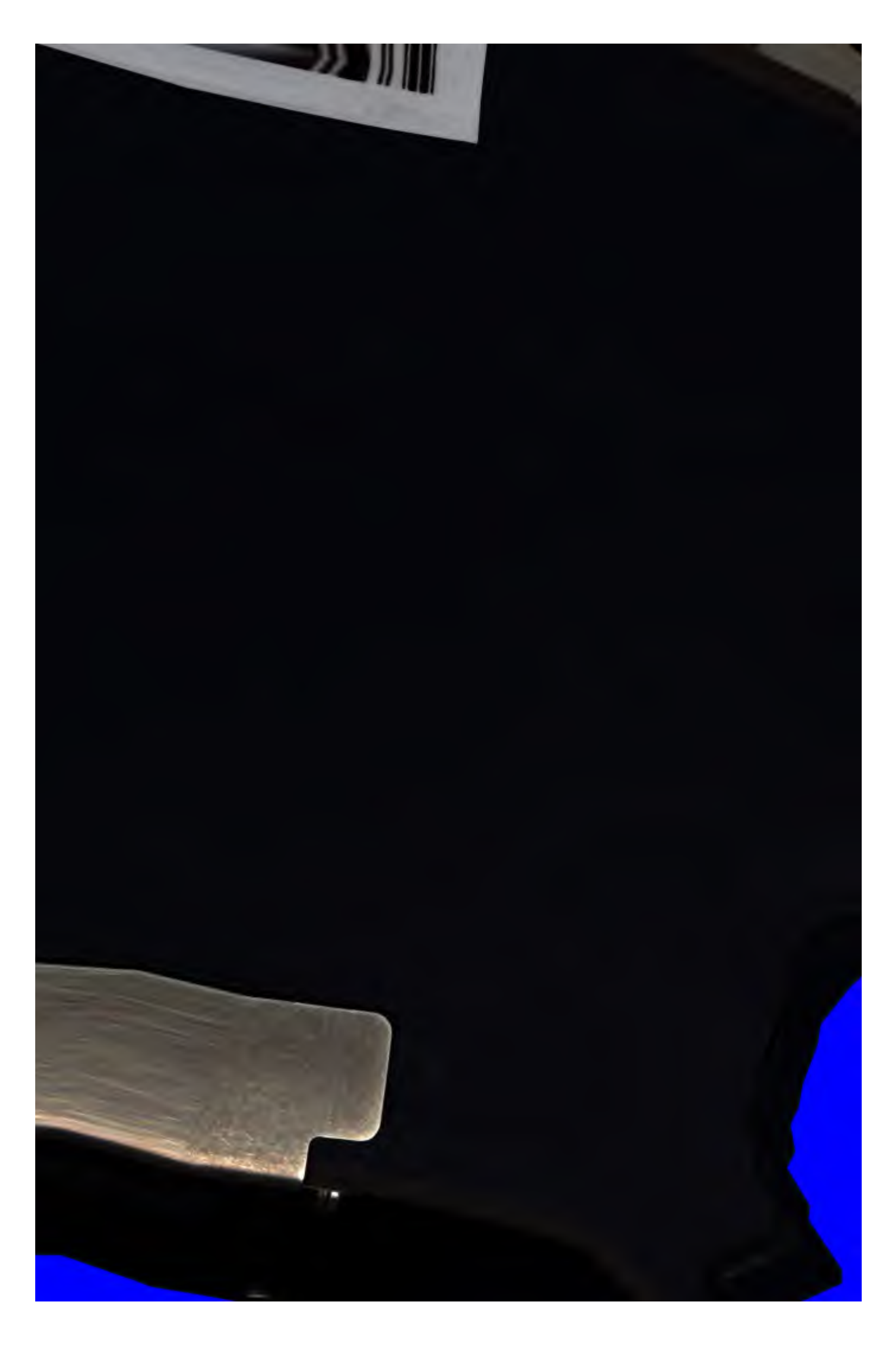

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EL DORADO.

A Novel.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

BY

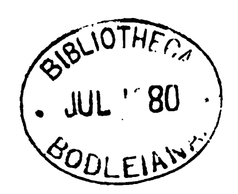
ALFRED LEIGH.

Author of "Maud Atherton."

"I have beene assured by such of the Spanyardes as have seene Manoa, the emperiall Citie of Guiana, which the Spanyardes call El Dorado, that for the greatness, for the riches, and for the excellent seate, it farre exceedeth any of the world."

SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

VOL. II.



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1880.

CONTENTS.



EL DORADO.

CHAPTER I.

AN ALTERED LIFE COURSE.

WHILE strangers were influencing the life of Gertrude Renetta, she herself, with no presentiment of impending change, lived with tranquil contentment in her world of dreams.

In their home, life flowed smoothly enough, with few striking events to mark its course. Was it strange that she should fancy nothing could alter this; that she should believe change belonged to the outer world, and that its rough breath was as powerless to influence her as it was to shatter the dream fabrics which she loved to build?

Edward's recently published volume of

poems had met with less success than any work of his which had preceded it. In part this was due to the fact that he had been only able to give a divided thought to their composition, his deepest faculties being devoted to his epic; in part, to three or four reviews which appeared upon the book; reviews which contrived, with consummate ingenuity of misrepresentation, to make the poems appear weak and unworthy, without uttering a single word which could not, by plausible sophistry, be justified from the charge of wilful untruth.

They did not wound Edward very deeply; an artist loves his dream children too well to be indifferent when they are unjustly attacked; but he who can die from the wounds of censure must be either morbidly sensitive or childishly vain. Whoever works nobly works successfully, if success means anything more than a harvest of gold, or the noisy shouts of ignorant approval; but the artist must work for truth's sake only, and

be content with the prospect of his own name being forgotten or abused, when the world is reaping the fruit of his genius and his toil.

Moreover, Edward Claridas had no time for morbid regret, even if he had been inclined to cherish it. The plain, necessary, prosaic toil for bread, as well as the tyrannic fascination of mental labour, occupied him day and night.

Lionel Vivian had repeatedly urged him to rest, but in vain, although he knew that his secret was becoming daily more difficult to keep. Perhaps even his dauntless strength of purpose and self-control would have failed to hide it any longer from his sister Emily, if her head had not been fully occupied with other things. Human sympathy, after all, is a very imperfect thing; not from deliberate selfishness, but from its inability, through mental pre-occupation, to recognise the suffering of others. Your old friend Brown wrote you a letter when your mother died, which

touched you deeply by its affectionate sincerity; but he forgot it in his indignation at the quality of the claret that day at dinner; your fair deity, Juliet, is not indifferent to the fact that her beauty has desolated your life, but the petty village successes of her husband are a sweeter triumph to her than the love you laid reverently at her feet—the broken toys of her baby are deeper realities to her than your broken heart. Not that either Brown or Juliet are shallow-hearted—they have not forgotten you. But a nature must possess abnormal strength if it can always be as loyal to the past as to the present—if it can as vividly realise the facts which are remote, as the events which are near at hand.

One evening Edward was engaged in preparing the salient points of a brief for a more successful barrister, whose time was so fully occupied that he was frequently glad of such assistance, when Eliza Yellowink stumbled into the room, with her habitual grace, and handed him two cards.

"Who is it, Edward?" said Emily, who was sitting at the other end of the room, reading a novel in a low voice to Gertrude.

"No one you know, dear," he said hurriedly, putting his papers away and rising to leave the room.

Emily looked rather surprised at this unusual reticence; but Edward, giving her no time for further enquiries, entered the adjoining room.

Here he found Major Lascelles and Colonel Renetta. The latter was a man of about fifty years of age, tall, well-dressed, and handsome, whose dark eyebrows and moustache were a striking contrast to his white hair. He had fine eyes, regular features, and a mouth too unyielding to be agreeable. His expression was one of haughty reserve.

He bowed to Edward, saying—

"I think I have the honour of speaking to Mr. Claridas?"

"That is my name," said Edward, not waiting to bandy compliments.

"You have a young lady named Renetta in your house, I think?"

"She is in the next room now."

"I should like to see her at once."

"I must ask your indulgence for a few minutes. From your card I infer that you stand in some near relationship to Miss Renetta; but you will at once recognise the necessity of that relationship being clearly established, before I subject her to the agitation of an interview with you."

"I do recognise it; and before I came here to-night I prepared proofs, legally as well as morally conclusive. These are in my lawyer's hands, and can be carefully examined by you to-morrow. In the meantime, let me introduce Major Lascelles (to whom I am indebted for this discovery), and ask you for a few minutes' conversation on this theme, assuming for the moment the truth of the assertion which I now make, and which I am fully prepared to prove."

"And that assertion is—"

"That Gertrude is my daughter, and therefore must no longer remain in a dependent position in your house."

Edward experienced that sudden clash of thought and feeling which most of us have felt, when menaced by a sudden and unlooked for catastrophe. This blind, friendless girl had become so dear to him, that the prospect of parting with her for ever seemed equivalent to destroying the whole character of the home. He answered quietly—

"Assuming the fact of your relationship to be correct, no one can question your right for a moment. But I must ask you, Colonel Renetta, not to speak of your daughter as a dependent. She and my sister have been friends from childhood, and her position in this house has never been embittered by the sense of obligation."

Colonel Renetta bowed, but made no reply to this. He felt that he had cause to be deeply grateful to this man, and to him the knowledge was more unbearable than the sense

of bitter wrong. So he explained the train of circumstances which had led to this discovery, produced a copy of Mrs. Evansleigh's letter to Miss Levere, and gave other proofs which convinced Edward of the justice of his claim.

"I assume, when I have satisfied you that the originals are genuine, of which these papers are copies, you will offer no resistance to my daughter at once coming to my house?"

"I have no right to offer any resistance. When will it be convenient for you to show me these papers? I have little doubt concerning them; but it is a duty I owe to Miss Renetta that nothing should be done carelessly."

"Will ten o'clock to-morrow morning be too early for you?"

"No."

The Colonel handed him the card of a well-known firm of solicitors.

"Do you know these people?"

"Very well."

"Have you any objection to meet my friend and myself at their office?"

"None whatever."

"Then we may regard it as an appointment?" said the Colonel, rising.

"Certainly; and, in the meantime, I will prepare Gertrude for your visit."

Edward could not call her "Miss Renetta" again.

"Thank you. I—I have not said anything about your kindness to my daughter sir; but—but I am deeply sensible of it."

Edward saw that the words cost the proud man effort, and intimated by a gesture that they were quite unnecessary.

"You—you have placed me under a deep obligation, sir," stammered the Colonel, divided between a generous impulse of gratitude, and the meaner motive of a proud man resenting what he esteems the degradation of a favour. "If—if I can serve you in any way—if I may offer you any—any pecuniary compensation, I—"

Edward interrupted him, with quiet dignity—

"I must request, Colonel Renetta, that you will refrain from repeating any suggestion of that nature; and, as I have never been guilty of the coarseness of patronage, perhaps you will be equally forbearing."

Colonel Renetta, not seeing his way very clearly to a reply, wisely did not attempt one, but took his departure without further delay, casting, as he did so, a wistful look at the closed door of the room where his unknown daughter sat, unconscious of the fact of his existence.

Edward entered the room immediately after his visitors had gone, and Emily saw at once by his face that something unusual had happened. She forbore, however, from questioning him, as she saw him silently resume his work. Gertrude went to the piano, and played soft, dreamy chords of harmonic reverie, varied now and then by a plaintive melody, unstudied and free as the

song of a nightingale. To Edward there seemed an unusual sadness in these strains, as though they were vocal with thoughts of farewell. As she ceased playing, he came to the piano and led her to her usual seat by the fire. Then signing to Emily to take the chair beside her, he said, gently—

"Dear Gertrude, there is something I wish to say to you. Will you forgive me if any word I may utter should give you pain?"

"Nothing you can say will pain me," she said, "unless it tells of sorrow to you, and you have never spoken of that."

"What makes you think that I am about to speak of it now?"

"I did not think it, but I can detect a tone of sadness in your voice."

"It is a selfish sorrow, then," he said, trying to speak lightly, "for I have bright news for you, Gerty, and that should mean gladness for us all."

She turned to him inquiringly, with a vague

fear in her face, and moved her lips as if to speak, but no sound escaped them.

He continued, in the same tone of chivalrous tenderness—

"You have promised not to be pained by my words. Will you allow me to ask you one or two questions?"

She silently inclined her head.

"In the far past, dear Gertrude—before you came here—before you made our home brighter by your presence—"

She made a gesture of dissent, but he continued—

"You have made it brighter for both of us. One cannot live in daily companionship with purity and genius like yours, without being better for it. Emily has continually felt this, I know, and so have I."

He had never spoken to her like this before, and she felt bewildered by the rush of thought and feeling in her mind. To have moved him even so much as this was more than she had ever dared to hope for, and she

felt as deep a triumph at these words, as other women experience when the exclusive homage of a heart is laid at their feet. But the new rapture of this strange, sweet joy was shadowed by the vague dread of coming sorrow. She raised Emily's hand to her lips, but did not speak.

Edward continued—

"Before that time—before your long, lonely life at the school—have you no remembrance of a heart that loved you?"

She shook her head.

"No memory of a mother's voice?"

She answered now, by a strong effort—

"Sometimes I have dreamed of a voice that I loved, before the world grew stern and dreary to me—of caresses and love that were warm like sunshine. But I was a mere baby then, and I have never known whether to trust these fancies or not."

She spoke even more hesitatingly than was her wont. Her voice betrayed deep agitation, and her eyes were full of tears, though

whether they had arisen from triumph or dread, from memory or the sense of helplessness, she could not have told. Emily looked into Edward's face, with an instinctive foreknowledge of his next words. He did not return her look, but continued, still watching Gertrude's attentive face—

"Have you never thought about your parents, dear Gertrude? Have you never longed to know them?"

"Often in the old time—never since I came here. Why do you talk to me like this?" she said, wildly. "They both died when I was a child. I have been told so over and over again."

"Your mother died when you were four years old, but information has come to me, unsought and undesired, which compels me to believe that your father is living yet."

She sprang from her chair, and made the wild hopeless gesture of one in darkness and danger, groping for light and safety.

"You will not let him know I am here!"

Her pleading cry was almost like a wail. "I have no protector, no friends but you and Emily. If you let him take me away, my heart will break."

He soothed her as though she had been a frightened child, before he answered, sadly—

"Dearest Gertrude, if the choice rested with me, nothing should separate us; but it does not, for your father has a right which I cannot question, and he claims the immediate fulfilment of it."

Only realising that she must leave this home where life had been so sweet to her, she sobbed with all the bitterness of a breaking heart.

Signing to Emily to comfort her, Edward left the room, thinking she would probably recover her composure sooner in his absence.

He was himself deeply affected at the prospect of the coming separation, and touched by the poignancy of Gertrude's grief. The deepest element of this—her worship for him—he did not for a moment suspect; but he understood perfectly the dread with which

she shrank from the companionship of strangers, and the influence of new surroundings. He never imagined what he was to her, and her wild outburst of grief that night had not revealed her secret to him. But there are many kinds of love, and he did not doubt that he and his sister both held a place in her affection. She was very dear to him, as trusting weakness must always be to noble strength, as the pure life of a beautiful woman must ever be to a man with anything of the poetic nature. If the suddenness of this discovery made it difficult even for him (accustomed as he was to control impulse and hide feeling) to remain perfectly calm, what was more natural than that she, with widely different life experiences, should be overcome by it?

When he re-entered the room where he had left her, after the lapse of nearly an hour, he found her on the sofa, resting her head upon Emily's shoulder, far more composed than he had anticipated.

"Tell me all," she said, with a calmness that would have been noteworthy in a nature of far greater strength than hers; "I can bear to hear it now."

So Edward told her briefly and gently, of his visitors that evening, and their discovery, and of her father's determination to take her to his home at once.

Gertrude listened to his story without any further violent outburst of sorrow; and it was characteristic of her that she said nothing more about resisting her father's wishes. Her first impulse had been to defy them, but Edward had pronounced them just, and she obeyed every word of his with the unquestioning servitude of a love that was almost a fanatical worship.

But her calmness was quite as much owing to despair as to the unwonted strength with which great emergencies sometimes endow natures whose emotions are, under ordinary circumstances, their habitual guides. To her it seemed as though that night had desolated

her life by imposing upon her a second blindness, harder to be borne than the burden, the weight of which had been lightened by sympathy and time. She had been content to dwell in a darkness brightened by the companionship of the woman whom she believed to be a heroine, and the man whom she almost idealised into a god. But this father whom she had never seen, and towards whom she felt no thrill of tenderness—this home where she would be compelled to mingle with strangers, who would not understand her, and whose characters would be as inscrutable to her as mystic poems written in an unknown tongue—what future gladness, what possibilities even of hopeful endurance could they unfold for her?

It was nothing to her that in this new home she would receive the homage and flattery which are always yielded freely to an heiress who is young and beautiful; it was nothing to her, that in the future, no material wish which indulgent fondness could grant,

or capricious fancy desire, need remain unsatisfied; all this was worse than nothing to her, for it had in it an element of bitter mockery, like the glittering pageantry which burlesques the moment, when a sorrowing nation watches its hero laid in the cold bosom of the insensible earth.

That night, when the time for retirement to rest had come, Edward did not instantly release the hand Gertrude held out to him when she wished him good-night.

" Be brave, Gerty," he said gently, " and hopeful too, the day may come when you will look gladly back upon to-night, and smile at the fears which trouble you now."

And moved by an impulse of sympathy, he stooped down and kissed her.

He had never touched her lips before though they had lived for five years under the same roof, and in that moment his caress of sympathy was cruelty, though he knew it not.

For it revealed to her depths of passion in

her own love which she had never suspected until now; it forced even more vividly upon her the consciousness of all with which she was about to part; and it had in it something of the crowning bitterness of an eternal farewell.

Of all the spiritual gifts which men have coveted, perhaps the most fascinating, and yet the most terrible, would be the power to read the secrets of every human breast as angels read them, whereby every house would become an epic, and a single London street would be found to enfold more marvel and mystery, more farce and tragedy, more rapture and despair, than the imagination of genius, through all the centuries of Time, has ever dared to dream.

In one little house three lives were close together in appearance, yet separated in spirit, more utterly than by the estrangement of distance or of time.

Emily Claridas had cried herself to sleep over Gerty's sorrow, and then in the dream

world had forgotten her in thoughts of Guy Waldegrave and an airy love palace of her own.

Edward, too, had forgotten Gertrude, had forgotten his own sorrows—had forgotten everything except the bright creations of his fancy—as he wrote alone with the silent rapture of an artist, to whom great thoughts come unsought.

And meanwhile Gertrude sat in her room by the open window, as heedless of the cold night air which fanned her burning forehead, as of the serene stars whose light she could not see.

She realised now all that this discovery of her father's existence meant, and she shrank from the lonely future, as prisoners in the Bastille have shrunk, knowing that the outer world is closed to them for ever, and that the pitiless walls of their cells will witness the gradual ruin of their minds, and the silent breaking of their hearts.

"To leave all that I love—perhaps to be

forgotten by them," she murmured; "yet he kissed me! . . . Nothing can rob me of that. . . . . . Oh, God, Thou knowest how I have loved him; be pitiful—let me die to-night."

Heaven does not always, or even often grant such mad supplications as these; but it is a false theology that asks us to believe they are heard with stern resentment; for the life that began in obscurity, and, ended, in vicarious sacrifice, revealed the character of God; and to the divine tenderness thus manifested, it must be evident that in the moments of suffering, through which some spirits pass, when life appears hopeless and the world seems dark, the strongest heart grows faint, and the thought of Death is sweet.





CHAPTER II.

A VAIN APPEAL.

IT is only at night that articulate cries for death are uttered, for the light of morning brings with it the weariness of enforced acquiescence. When the woman you loved sent you back all the presents you had given her, with a ladylike note intimating, with feminine grace of diction, that she thought it expedient on the whole to forget the past (a suggestion she literally fulfilled by her subsequent marriage with an illiterate millionaire), it was not altogether unpardonable that you should indulge that night in a rather incoherent and very ridiculous soliloquy, to the general effect that the world contained nothing for you now but weariness and

despair; but your hot water in the morning reminded you that shaving was still a necessity. By the light of "night's candles" vulgar realities may be ignored, but when

> jocund day
> Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops,

such a course is impossible. In spite of all that poets have said in its praise, daylight is essentially practical—the disagreeable fact of your life being desolate will not prevent your tailor from sending in his bills; it is far from a consoling reflection that your heart is broken, but it does not affect the necessity that the income-tax should be paid. We rise and do our work in the world as best we can, but the silent weariness of day is harder to be borne than the acute misery of night.

Gertrude Renetta awoke next morning with vague yet crushing consciousness of loss; to her the day brought sorrow—and sorrow without light. It may seem to many that it betrayed contemptible weakness, to

shrink thus from encountering any future, and that it was unnatural for a girl to feel no impulse of tenderness towards a father who would doubtless love her for her mother's sake, who had sought her out, and could tell her many things she had repeatedly longed to know. But it must be borne in mind that an isolated life and continual darkness, had fostered the want of self-reliance, and the tendency of feeling to dominate over reason in Gertrude's nature. Her father was to her little more than the embodiment of a cruel change—how could any affection be possible between them?

But when Emily came into her room, she spoke quietly of the future. Her father's home was at Richmond—why should they not often meet together? Emily caught at the idea, and suggested also a faithful and confidential correspondence between them, but Gertrude shook her head.

"I shall never write, Emily," she said sadly. "I cannot write common-place to you, and

to dictate one's secret thoughts and feelings to a stranger would seem coarse and wrong to me."

Emily changed the subject, seeing that Gertrude was pained by it, and tried to talk cheerfully of other things; after all they might be bearing the burden of purely imaginary evils. Perhaps Colonel Renetta would freely recognise the affection between them; perhaps he would let Gertrude be a frequent visitor at her old home, and Emily might even be an occasional guest at Richmond. Viewed in this light, the separation between them did not seem so formidable after all, and Emily was a perfect mistress of the delightful sophistry which considers the pleasantest prospect to be always the most probable.

At the solicitor's office Major Lascelles and Colonel Renetta were already waiting for Edward, when he called in punctual fulfilment of his appointment to meet them. The two gentlemen were not unlike the frigid

and the torrid zones, for Colonel Renetta in his greeting, his demeanour, and his voice, was as cold as an iceberg, while an ill-cooked cutlet at breakfast had lashed the Major into a fury. The discovery of a thermometer which would measure the mental and moral condition of man, is reserved for the future—probably for the remote future—for supply is always regulated by demand, and the demand would inevitably be limited by the great expense of the luxury. Only consider how frequently the too rapidly rising Mercury would break the glass!

As Edward had anticipated, Colonel Renetta had prepared proofs that were absolutely conclusive of the relationship between Gertrude and himself. His marriage with Gertrude Evansleigh, the record in the parish register of Brading, of their child's baptism, further correspondence between Mrs. Evansleigh and Miss Levere, letters from the sister of Mrs. Evansleigh (who was still living, and who sent legally

attested copies of letters in her possession, which Miss Levere had been in the habit of writing until the time of her death, with reference to the child under her charge); the papers together formed a chain of evidence in which not a single link was wanting. The one doubt that suggested itself—Why had not these proofs of relationship been forthcoming when Gertrude's need was greatest?—was easily answered. Mrs. Evansleigh and Miss Levere had died within a week of each other, and the knowledge of Gertrude's existence had not reached Mrs. Evansleigh's sister, who was at that time abroad, until some months later. When she at length heard it, and learned also of the death of Miss Levere, she had made some attempts to discover the child, but inquiries actuated only by a faint disinterested compassion, are apt to be languid; hers had been utterly futile; she believed the child's father to be dead, and therefore suffered the whole story to become to her merely a half remembered and uninfluencing tradition of the past.

Edward examined all the papers carefully and deliberately, asking what questions were necessary, but making no further remarks. At the conclusion of his scrutiny Colonel Renetta said—

"Are you satisfied now, sir, that I have made out a case?"

"Undoubtedly you have done so. If I had come here this morning to quibble and dispute, I should have been compelled to admit that you had established the justice of your claim; as I only came in all candour to verify your statements, it is almost superfluous for me to say that I am satisfied."

Edward had obtained far too complete a control both over his face and his voice, to betray annoyance, but he could not help feeling pained by Colonel Renetta's manner. No man was less inclined than he to expect or desire any expressions of gratitude for services he had rendered gladly, without either hope or thought of reward; but it was not agreeable to be treated with a suspicion that was only half veiled, and a reticence that almost

amounted to discourtesy. He felt it difficult, too, to repress a dislike to this man, founded on motives deeper than any which could have arisen from merely personal considerations. What hope could there be for Gertrude's future life with her father? Assuming the nobleness of his motives, and that he would earnestly endeavour to make her life happy, what probability was there that he would be successful? A woman of any strength of character, is a problem that will frequently baffle the analysis of those who have given her the patient study of years. This obvious general truth had special force with regard to Gertrude, the sensitiveness and impulsiveness, the unreasoning antipathies and unreserved reverence of whose character had been fostered by influences altogether exceptional. How could Colonel Renetta's house become a home for a girl, who had no memories of childhood spent there to make it sacred, whose character had been developed under altogether dissimilar influences? Moreover,

even if this fundamental difficulty could be overcome, what prospect was there of harmony between a dreamy impulsive girl, and a proud imperious man, between the isolation of blindness, and the isolation of unsympathetic pride? Edward felt bitterly the necessity of yielding her up. Like most strong natures he was not free from a proud hatred of coercion, and in this case it seemed almost like coercion into wrong, as though he were consenting that a free song-bird should be imprisoned in a cage, where its brilliant plumage would inevitably fade, and its voice be pitilessly hushed into silence. However, he hid all this with the wonderful strength of will which had been his characteristic from a child, and which had matured through years of self discipline. For Gertrude's sake he must preserve friendly relations with her father; so though he would not stoop to any gross form of conciliation, he hid both his dislike and his regret completely, as he hid the physical

suffering which was his daily experience, as he could have hidden any great secret entrusted to him, though all the tortures which ingenuity of cruelty has invented, had been put into force to compel him to reveal it.

"Then I presume," said Colonel Renetta, "that there is no longer any reason why I should not see my daughter?"

"None whatever," said Edward. "I have prepared her for your visit, and she is quite ready to receive you."

"Then I'll say good-bye, Fred," said Major Lascelles. "You'll like to be alone, and I can have the pleasure of being introduced to your daughter at your house."

All sorrow in life is not irreparable. If our eloquence has not thrilled senates, it may still be effective after dinner to guests rendered amiable by our wine; and there are men of so philosophical a constitution, that if they fail in winning the affections of a countess they can contentedly solace their bereaved hearts by gaining the smiles of a

barmaid. The thought had just occurred to Major Lascelles, with all the sweetness of religious consolation, that he might, poetically speaking, make the unsavoury cutlet of the morning a "stepping stone whereby to rise to higher things." In other words, that although breakfast had failed, the beneficent institutions of society still ordained that man might atone for this by lunch. Encouraged by this beautiful reflection, he parted cordially with his old friend, shook hands with Edward, and was heard, as he disappeared, to chuckle with undisguised enjoyment.

Without another word, Colonel Renetta accompanied Edward to his house, where Gertrude and Emily were waiting to receive them. Emily had thought that it would be better for father and daughter to meet each other for the first time alone, but Gertrude had pleaded for companionship, with too evident a sincerity to be refused.

Edward could not help watching the

Colonel's face narrowly at the moment of his first meeting with his daughter, for he had rightly anticipated that many inferences might be justly drawn from it. Self-consciousness has taught the face to lie, and the lesson has been learned so perfectly, that facial expression can rarely be accepted as trustworthy testimony; but in moments of intense feeling, men forget to act, and consequently their hearts—if they have any—cease to be hidden.

There was little feeling, except pride, to be read in Colonel Renetta's face, as he entered the room, but when he saw Gertrude, an unaffected change passed over him. Agitation had made her paler than usual, but she looked very beautiful, and formed as striking a contrast to Emily's happy type of round, babyish beauty, as a great poem, whose theme is a life-long farewell, bears to a serenade.

For the moment, Colonel Renetta rose above the sense of petty pride and wounded dignity, remembering that this was his

daughter, and the daughter of the woman whom he had loved, when life meant infinitely more to him than it meant now.

"Ah, child," he said, in a voice strangely unlike his usual cold, unsympathetic tones, "ah, child, you are like your mother, but your face is sadder."

Unstudied tenderness touches the heart more than any deliberate eloquence can do. For the first time, at this allusion to her mother, Gertrude felt a responsive thrill of sympathy with this man who was about to effect such utter revolution in her life. The thought of him in connection with herself was too foreign and strange to move her to tenderness, but the thought of him as her young mother's lover was less difficult to imagine, and brought with it a new feeling, which was not love, yet had something in common with it, and might actually become love in course of time.

She suffered him to caress her, and whispered, when his lips had touched hers—

"You speak of my mother—I have often wondered and dreamed about her. Did you love her?"

And he answered simply—

"Ay, child, God knows I loved her—as I will love you."

It was a hopeful beginning of their companionship; more hopeful than any one of them had dared to anticipate. Edward saw that they might be safely alone now, and by a common impulse, he and Emily noiselessly left the room together.

Gertrude was at first too agitated to notice this, though, under ordinary circumstances, her quick sense of hearing would have detected it immediately. Her father sat down by her side, and said, still caressing her—

"Do you know how beautiful you are?"

And she answered sadly—

"They have told me so; but how can I know if it is only their gentleness that makes them think so?"

Her words wounded her father with a sudden pain. In natures unaccustomed to exalted feeling, such moments almost invariably have a swift reaction of baser sensations, and lower considerations. Colonel Renetta had forgotten his daughter's blindness in the thought of her beauty, but her words recalled the fact to him, awakening a deeper bitterness than sympathy with Gertrude's sorrow. He would have been so proud of this girl if she could have shone brilliantly in London society, as her beauty entitled her to do, and he was stung by the sense that this was impossible. To his morbid pride, there was absolute humiliation in the consciousness of impotence. What could his wealth do for her? He could make her an heiress, and he would, but she would never see the house or estate she was to inherit; she could never appreciate his lavish expenditure for her. He could make her black hair sparkle with jewels, but she would be unable even to imagine their light.

He said more coldly than he had spoken before—

"Who are '*they?*'"

Gertrude never failed to detect the slightest variation of vocal inflection, and, thinking the altered tone was due entirely to the question itself, she rather drew back from her father's caressing arm, as she answered proudly—

"My best and only friends—Edward and Emily."

Her father bit his lip nervously, and found it difficult to repress the exclamation of impatience which rose instinctively to his lips. Could she not be five minutes in his society without talking of these people who had given him what he felt was harder to bear than any wrong—cause to be deeply grateful to them?

"Have you no other friends, Gerty" he said, "besides Mr. Claridas and his sister?"

"A few acquaintances, but no friends. I have never needed any."

"But you must have many friends in the

future," said her father, rather anxiously, for already a doubt had crossed his mind, whether this girl would carry out the scheme he had prepared for her; "you must have many friends in the future. I have already bought you some of the most beautiful jewels I could find."

"I like flowers better," she said, in her simple, unthinking way. "Jewels are hard and cold, but when you touch flowers they seem to caress you, and their breath is like a whisper of music."

Colonel Renetta let Gertrude's hand fall. Twenty years ago, if Gertrude Evansleigh had made such a remark to him, he would have thought the fancy a graceful one, and capped it by some pretty epigram about her lips; now he only thought it was a piece of sentimental folly, making a mental memorandum, to discourage all such remarks in future.

Even on the present occasion he could not refrain from saying, in a conclusive tone—

"There can be no comparison, my dear child, between flowers and jewels; the value, even of the finest flowers is very small, while it is impossible to estimate the worth of a really precious gem of the first water."

Gertrude said nothing, for, with a woman's quickness of instinctive perception, she already felt that the views of herself and her father were on entirely different foundations. She was strangely ignorant in the world's popular creeds, and to judge of the comparative worth of objects by estimating their respective cost, was as incomprehensible to her, as determining the relative value of paintings by weighing them.

"Tell me something of your life, dear," he said, thinking it better to leave the quiet intimation of common sense to fructify unaided, little knowing the character of the soil in which he had dropped the seed.

And Gertrude told him the story of her life, her hesitating speech becoming fluent when she spoke of Edward and Emily; and,

of course, they formed the almost exclusive theme of her narration. Colonel Renetta listened without interrupting her, but he felt bitterly disappointed. His own careful training, and the culture effected by society, might do much, but what probability was there of her ever becoming a match for the ordinary quick-witted girls, that might be met with in every drawing-room, who like a song or a novel well enough, but who would have laughed at the idea of putting any sentimental considerations before material good.

"What kind of education have you had, Gerty?" he said, when she had finished her story.

"I stayed at Miss Levere's till I was fourteen, but I was stupid, and never learned anything—but since I have been here I have learned many things."

"Who has taught you?"

"Edward."

"Curse him," thought the Colonel, "the

girl is mad about him." However, he only said aloud—

"You seem to admire Mr. Claridas very much, Gertrude?"

"He is good," she said simply, "he has genius. Have you read his poems?"

"No; I am not fond of poetry."

Gertrude felt that another avenue of sympathy was closed up. She felt not only how little they had in common, but also that he was dissatisfied with her. Could she do anything to please him? She knew nothing of the outer world, with which he was familiar—she could not speak to him of that. Of her own world, which was the little home where she had been sheltered so tenderly, he did not care to hear, and she had already discovered that he would think her dream-world a childish vagary. Yet he had loved her mother, and had said he would love her also—could she do nothing to please him?

Yes, there was one thing. Gertrude knew that she had musical genius; that she could

speak through the medium of harmony, of thoughts quite unutterable in words. Perhaps she could touch his heart that way; other people, who had not cared for her, had been strangely affected when she had played to them—perhaps her music might speak to him of the dead past; of his own lost youth; of the young and beautiful girl whom he had loved.

Yielding to the impulse of the moment, she rose without saying a word, and walked across the room.

Edward's habit of leading her to the piano was merely an act of courtesy, for it had long ceased to be a necessity, so perfectly did she know the position of every object in the room.

Her father watched her with astonishment, not unmingled with displeasure. He disliked impulsiveness, and could not understand why she should leave his side so suddenly. Before he could say a word to her, however, she began to play.

It was a characteristic of Gertrude's music that it always mirrored the state of her heart and mind; therefore she never played so well as in moments of deep feeling.

Edward and Emily, listening in the next room, thought they had never heard her play as she did that morning. Her regrets at the thought of parting, her longing for sympathy, her awakened remembrance of childhood, mingled with the passion of a love which had made her cry to God for death, seemed to move her with the greatness of poetic inspiration.

The piano is not a sympathetic instrument, from the nature of its construction; for strings will not give, at the stroke of a hammer, the refined shades of melody that they yield to the touch of the fingers or the bow; but as Gertrude played that morning, there was no mechanical coldness in its tone. She played wild chords of passion and power, low, sweet reveries, and dreamy suggestions of airs, that faded away into one another,

ending in a wild fantastic fancy, plaintive as a woman's inarticulate cry for love.

Such airs occur sometimes in the works of Haydn and Beethoven, and always at the conclusion of stormy, incoherent sound; but our modern composers have never succeeded even in imitating them.

At last Gertrude stopped, and waited for a word from her father, as though she had addressed to him a definite appeal.

He had listened with astonishment. Even to his unpractised ear, it was evident that such playing was truly wonderful; but it was no more wonderful to him than any remarkable feat of sleight of hand would have been; it did not associate itself with any emotion to him; it awakened no echo in his heart. It was merely sound, of such skilful production that it was disagreeably suggestive of professional proficiency.

"You are a remarkable player, Gerty," he said; "but I am not fond of music. So don't play any more; I would rather hear you talk."

He had no intention to pain her, and was not in the least aware that his words could have that effect. How was it possible for a man, to whom music meant no more than a child's rattle made elaborate by system, to understand what it meant to a girl like Gertrude?

But his words crushed the last hope in her breast, more utterly than if he had struck her; she had laid at his feet the costliest sacrifice she could offer, and he had not even stooped to pick it up.

The tears started to her eyes, but she kept them by a strong effort from falling, and suffered him to lead her back to her old place by his side.

But a great sense of loneliness had fallen upon her like a shadow, and her heart wearied—as stronger hearts than hers have done—with the bitter knowledge that life henceforth had no brighter prospect to unfold than patience.



CHAPTER III.

IN THE FIRELIGHT.

WHEN Edward and Emily at length re-entered the room, Colonel Renetta rose and said it was time for him to go.

"How soon will it be convenient for you to come to my house, Gerty?" he said to her, immediately afterwards.

"Whenever you wish," she answered. "I have very little to arrange."

She had always shrunk from society, and had made very few people her friends—even those, she would rather not associate with.

"Parting is sweet sorrow" only when a future reunion can be looked for; it is bitter enough when the separation is for ever.

To all her acquaintances she would send a

word of affectionate farewell; she could not tell them what she herself knew already, that she would be henceforth removed from them, by causes against which she was powerless to contend.

The hopeless obstacles in life are never material. Seas may be traversed and mountains crossed; it is the estrangement—natural or enforced—of hearts that constitutes the certainty of an eternal loneliness.

"Will the day after to-morrow be too soon?" enquired the Colonel.

Gertrude thought it would not.

"Then I will call for you in the morning," said her father; and after a little unimportant general conversation he left them.

When he had gone Emily took Gertrude up into her own room, and said, in her pretty, coaxing way—

"Don't look so sorrowful, Gerty, but tell me all about it."

"There's nothing to tell," said Gertrude, hopelessly; "except that he will never love

me—that he will never even understand me."

Then she told her all (it was little enough, though it seemed much to her) that he had said to her.

Emily tried to comfort her, but without much success. It was always difficult for her to understand Gertrude, though she loved her so dearly. Not that she was shallow in heart, or coldly selfish in disposition; but the nature must be highly endowed indeed that can sympathetically understand a heart, actuated by wholly different experiences and impulses to its own.

Of course, this is opposed to popular belief; for every man fancies himself capable of understanding and criticising everything, from a sermon to an epic; from a woman's bonnet to the foreign policy of an imperial government. But this follows as a necessary corollary to the belief in one's personal omniscience, which most of us hold to be an indisputable axiom. Still, sceptics occasion-

ally appear who question the fact, and comforting articles of faith are not always true, although the supporters of sulphureous theology appear to think so, if any inference may be drawn from their bitter denunciation of those who would rob them of the tenets from which they seem to derive so much satisfaction.

But be this as it may, with regard to persons of exceptionally high endowments—in which classification most men, consciously or unconsciously, include themselves—it is undoubtedly true with regard to ordinary individuals.

Emily was a bright, loving, pretty girl; but there was very little about her that was remarkable, except her own knowledge of the fact. She felt that there were depths in Gertrude's heart she could not fathom; but she did not arrive at the customary induction in such cases—that these incomprehensible characteristics must of necessity be absurd; on the contrary, she ascribed the

difficulty she experienced to the fault of her own perception.

"I wish I could comfort you, Gerty, darling," she whispered, her bright eyes full of tears. "I shall be dreadfully lonely without you, and you always feel things more deeply than I do; I suppose it must be because you have genius."

Emily always explained every difference between them, that asserted itself, in this way; she reverenced Gertrude deeply, but she thought that genius must be an uncomfortable possession, notwithstanding.

However, they adopted the infallible girlish remedy of kissing each other, and determined to think no more of parting, till the morning for separation actually came.

Time is a capricious tyrant as well as a pitiless one. The icy finger that, with one long relentless pressure, compels cathedral pillars to crumble into ruin, and lusty human life to moulder into dust, can perform sleight of hand tricks with wonderful dexterity, and

cheat us all by his manner of dealing out his cards, which are days and hours.

When the Reverend Dr. McSwab is at the eighteenth point of his sermon on "Election," Time seems as fast asleep as the greater part of the worthy divine's congregation, with such weary footsteps do the lagging moments pass; but the old tyrant, in his envy, gives fleet wings to the hours spent with Violet or Maud.

Gertrude and Emily thought the rapidity of the passing minutes cruel, as they realised the fact, next day that it might be the last they should ever spend together in the old home.

Emily soon recovered her wonted spirits, however; it was a necessity of her nature to look upon the bright side of everything. Moreover, Guy Waldegrave was coming that evening, and she had begun to think a great deal about his visits—a circumstance which, taken in connexion with the fact that she generally took twenty minutes on these occa-

sions, to choose a flower for her hair, may suggest, to a discerning reader, conclusions not entirely without foundation.

When he called that evening (his visits, by the way, had become very frequent now) he was truly sorry to hear of Gertrude's intended departure, for he had always admired her, and treated her with a deferential delicacy, very noteworthy in one of his careless temperament; but in a little while he and Emily were teasing each other as zealously as Benedick and Beatrice used constantly to do.

Gertrude sat at the piano, playing very softly, being unwilling to disturb them. She liked Guy very much, and though Emily would turn off love charges with well-acted merriment, Gertrude knew, with quiet certainty and contentment, whither the stream of events was flowing. Perhaps the thought may have saddened her a little as she dreamed over the piano's murmuring keys; it is not always easy to congratulate the winner of a lottery, when one has drawn a blank, if the

cost of admission is hope and happiness, and the prize is love.

Still, there was no thought of envy in her breast at that moment—it would have been base to be indifferent to Emily's happiness; it was idle to quarrel with the inevitable. To some women God had given love and light; to some He had given lonely darkness. Patience, at least, was possible—a dreary creed—but no philosophy has ever taught sorrow a more hopeful one.

"That is Mr. Vivian's knock," she said, stopping abruptly.

It was a very unusual thing for her when she was at the piano to notice anything that occurred, every faculty she possessed being under the dominion of the music; but to-night even harmony seemed unable to engage her restless attention.

At this moment a crash was heard, followed by loud lamentations.

"Eliza has fallen downstairs," said Emily. "It seems very hard-hearted, but I must own

I'm weary of Eliza's falls. I tremble when I hear a knock at the door, for I always know she is sure to hurt herself in trying to open it."

"Go and console her, dear," said Edward, smiling. "I will open the door to him myself."

It was early in March; a bleak, cold, wintry night. Edward saw that the snow was falling heavily, and that Lionel was very wet.

"Come in, Mr. Vivian," he said. "It was very good of you to venture out such a pitiless night as this. I hope there has been nothing wrong to bring you round. I scarcely expected you."

"Nothing wrong whatever; only I wished to see that poor child once more. It is decided she should leave to-morrow, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Ah, they'll break her heart if they try to fashion her after some conventional mould. She will not play and sing six months hence as she does now."

"Shall we go into the other room? There is no one there but the girls and Waldegrave."

"One word first, Edward. How have you been lately?"

"What a doleful way of opening a conversation! No one is very well when the wind is as bitter as the irony of life."

"Have you slept any better lately?"

"I have scarcely tried.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I cannot sleep, and so I work instead."

"But such a strain must kill you?"

"Time kills every man; and yet people look complacently enough at their watches."

"Do not evade my words, Edward. I have been thinking almost constantly of what you said to me. It is time this constant struggle of yours ceased. You *must* rest."

"I cannot rest," was the quiet reply, in the low determined voice Lionel knew so well. "The work is incomplete, and I must finish it."

"If you will not leave off writing—if what you say is true, and I begin to believe it is,

that your restless activity *cannot* pause—let us make a compromise."

"What compromise?"

"This fact of Gertrude leaving you is a sorrow to you, I know; but it narrows your responsibilities. Let me prevail on you to do what I wanted long ago. Give up law work; let us all three go down to some quiet country place, where you can work, if you must, calmly, without being worried with parchment and red tape, and—and—." Lionel coloured and stammered, as though he were pleading for generosity instead of offering it. "And perhaps you would allow me to be your banker."

"Mr. Vivian," said Edward, "it is not easy for me to tell you how deeply I appreciate the offer of such generous aid; but the struggle of which you speak must not end yet."

"Will you not let me help you?"

"You do help me by the fact of your friendship."

"But will you not suffer me to prove it practically?"

"Not yet; the time has not come. Believe me, Mr. Vivian, I am grateful to you; but I cannot accept your noble offer."

"And your decision is final?"

"Quite."

Lionel knew that persuasion was useless; he could not contend against the other's strength of will. He tried to believe that all his fears might be unnecessary—that this dauntless courage could not be laid low; but his heart would not be lulled into delusive hope.

"Shall we go into the next room now?" he said, feeling bitterly the sense of his own impotence.

"By all means; and by the way, Mr. Vivian, it is hardly necessary for me to say you must not speak of what we have said to each other. Gerty's last night amongst us must not be a sorrowful one."

Lionel assented, and they entered the room together.

Edward kept his word. The night, although

it was the eve of parting, was not a sorrowful one. Lionel had never heard him talk as he did then. Without appearing to make any effort—without uttering a word that sounded forced—without betraying even to Lionel, who held the clue in his hands, that he was acting a part, Edward contrived to make them forget everything but the fascination of brilliant thought. Not that he monopolised the conversation; no master of that rare art knew better than he how dull even the most brilliant soliloquy at length becomes. As they sat round the fire while the bleak winds moaned without, they all seemed to catch the infection of his high spirits, till even Gertrude yielded herself up to the fascination of the moment, and, oblivious of the future, was happy.

At length there was a pause, and Lionel said—

"Will you not play us something, Miss Renetta? You know what I am. An evening without music is always incomplete to me."

A shadow passed over her face; how could

she play to-night? She could not trust herself to utter her heart's thoughts now.

"I am very sorry to refuse you anything, Mr. Vivian," she said, "but I cannot play to-night."

Lionel looked disappointed.

"Not even a few bars?" he said; "a few notes rather, for your playing is like the music of the spheres—it knows nothing of vulgar measurement."

Gertrude hesitated. She liked and respected Lionel too much to wish to refuse him anything, even though to grant it involved pain to herself. But, on the other hand, she knew she could not play mechanically, and if she once yielded herself up to the subtle companionship of music, she could not be certain of her self-control.

Edward saw her hesitation, and understood it.

"We will let you off with a song, Gerty," he said, lightly, coming to her side.

She felt his delicacy, and yielded. A song

would not cause her much effort, but even had it been otherwise, she would never have resisted any wish of his.

"What shall I sing?" she said, when he had led her to the piano.

"Sing that new song of yours," said Emily. "The one you composed last week."

"Which one do you mean?"

"'Parting for ever,' I think it was called."

It was a thoughtless request, but Guy turned it off by a laughing comment.

"I hope the words are yours," Miss Claridas," he said. "From the pathetic title, I infer they must be."

"No; they are from a novel I was reading to Gerty a little while ago. Do sing it, dear."

"The words are almost too sad for a song."

"Never mind; we have laughed quite enough to-night, and your minor airs are always the sweetest."

To a low dreamy melody, Gertrude sang, her clear voice giving the simple words a pathos quite indescribable—

Would that our lives had blended—thine and mine,
  As sea waves die each on the other's breast;
That my sad heart might closely beat to thine,
  And in thy purity my life find rest.

Our souls have, like our lips, together clung;
  And such embrace knows rapture e'en in pain,
As banished spirits hear faint anthems sung
  By mocking echoes, that recall a strain

Which bids them dream of Paradise. To-night
  Joy dies in sorrow—gladness in despair,
The while I watch your dark eyes' dreaming light,
  And touch the trailing tresses of your hair.

Heaven hath its recompense for all. We part,
  Life is too pitiless to join our hands;
But Death is gentler—and my faithful heart
  Will throb at last, near thine in distant lands.

Gertrude's voice did not falter as she sang, and none of her listeners realised how deeply her own thoughts accorded with the words. Emily felt the thoughtlessness of her request now, and came to Gertrude's side.

"Thank you, darling," she said, putting her hand on Gertrude's shoulder with a light caressing touch. "Your songs are wild and sweet enough to console for banishment from Paradise. Now, come back again to your seat by the fire. You have sung like a syren, and Mr. Vivian must be content."

Gertrude complied, and the semi-circle

round the fire was once more complete. But the spell was broken, and no one seemed disposed to renew the light tone of the former conversation. The words of plaintive farewell, and the dreamy air to which they had been sung, haunted them all.

"How the wind moans," said Edward, breaking the silence. "One can scarcely help fancying that all the spirits who startled Tam O' Shanter are abroad to-night."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Waldegrave?" said Lionel.

"I believe in witches," replied Guy, with some emphasis.

Emily tried not to look self-conscious, and said—

"Tell us a ghost story, Edward. That moaning wind is just the accompaniment for one."

The request was echoed from all sides, Guy adding to the general petition—

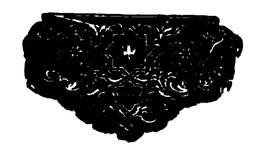
"Introduce a little love-making into the story, Claridas, to give it human interest."

"I don't remember any legend of that

kind," said Edward, " except the tragedy of that dogmatic spectre, Giles Scroggins, and you are probably familiar with that already."

" The plea will not avail," said Guy. " If you can't remember, you can invent."

Edward saw that excuses were useless ; so after a few minutes' consideration, he told the following story, without further preface.





CHAPTER IV.

A GHOST STORY.

"Ashborough was not at all a remarkable village. Its cottages were very much like other cottages; its larger houses had the same respectable dulness of appearance, which characterises the dwellings of provincial lawyers, doctors, and clergymen all over England. The village church was a quaint old building, girt round with ivy, with a shady churchyard, where many generations of obscure men and women slept in quietness, near the spot where in life they had toiled and loved.

"The Squire's house was indeed a fine old mansion, with many a story of the past to make it interesting. Staunch Protestant and Low Churchman as he was, the Squire loved

to show the private chapel, where centuries before, his ancestors had attended the celebration of High Mass; and the old Tory's eyes would sparkle, as he led you through the lofty banqueting-room, and told old traditions of gallant cavaliers who had there pledged Court beauties in rare old wine, and drunk confusion to the Roundhead cause. But, in spite of his ancestors, his wealth, and his fair young wife, the Squire was a commonplace country gentleman, fond of field sports and after-dinner slumber, without much more force of character than the average farm labourer, who greeted him with an awkward bow, and regarded him as the representative of existing laws and institutions. The Squire had inherited from his father a vigorous constitution, a kind heart, a hasty temper, broad estates, ample revenues, a practical knowledge of agriculture, a dislike to Dissenters, and so much, or rather so little, of Tory principles as is included in the hatred of original ideas and new fangled innovations.

Beyond this the Squire possessed little, and wanted no more.

"But the traveller, who visited the Rectory, had no longer cause to complain of the prevailing common place. The world had known Digby Layland once as a handsome young officer, with a compliment for every fair face he met, and free bounty for all who asked it; too fond of cards and horses, perhaps, but brave and generous always. This had been long ago. At the time of which I am speaking, he was Rector of Ashborough, and when the world spoke of him then, which it still occasionally did, it was as the writer of certain classical translations, evincing remarkable diligence and ability—as an old bookworm buried alive in the country, whom London life might have made a great man.

"The villagers were proud of their Rector, but they never loved him. He rarely visited them, and when compelled to do so, was as ill at ease in their cottages among their children, as they would have been in his

library among his books and papers. He preached, too, in a way which none of them could understand, short sermons with very long words in them, which invariably left upon the rustic congregation a misty conviction that somebody or something was, in some unknown way, wrong. But what was wrong, why it was wrong, and how it was to be altered, were questions inscrutable to minds unaided by the all-powerful and mysterious 'book learning.'

"Still, as I have said, the villagers were proud of him; he was 'a gentleman, every inch of him,' they said, and always kind to them as far as his pre-occupied thoughts would allow him to be. They had vague ideas of his fame in the outer world, of which they knew so little, and were proud to know that all his learned works had been written in Ashborough, and were actually dated from the village.

"Moreover, if they had been disposed to quarrel with him, they would have forgotten

their resentment in their love for his daughter, for Alice Layland was as dainty a queen as ever eclipsed a rival or broke a heart.

"No words can accurately describe the beauty of a woman—sometimes the flashing rhythm of poetry will give you a glimpse of it, but it is only an imperfect glimpse after all, and even that is impossible to prose. If I tell you that Alice had sunny hair and light blue eyes, that her lips seemed made for kissing, and her feet, as Bailey says, looked 'dreaming a dance' even in her sleep; it will give you but little idea of her beauty, but if you had watched her face and heard her voice—if you had held that soft little hand, even for a moment, in yours—if you could have made her blush by some whispered word of homage, you would have ceased to wonder at the extent of the little witch's dominion.

"Nature had given her beauty, and beauty had made her a coquette. It is a graceful poetical fancy that little feet like hers pass across the meadows, without crushing the

most fragile flower on which they tread, but it is not so in reality; girls, like Alice Layland, do crush flowers sometimes by a careless step, and break hearts often by a thoughtless word.

"The 'dear young lady' of religious novels, whose life consists in nursing rheumatic old women, making flannel petticoats for their daughters, and reading tracts to their sons, would not have considered Alice entitled to the respect due to a clergyman's daughter at all; she performed none of these offices—she hated being bored—she hated everything dull. She would have had life one long day in June—flattery, homage, petting, and admiration must always be hers, and if it could not be denied that there were such things as sin and misery in the world, she was very sorry, of course, but she would rather not hear about them; let old men and plain women attend to such matters—they were never intended for the consideration of a girl who was young and beautiful.

"Not a noble character you will say, and truly, in a world where such high destinies are possible to womanhood it was not noble; and yet it is harder to withhold tenderness from these glittering butterflies than from others who deserve it better. Such a feeling is partly due, of course, to mere admiration of their brightness, but I think it is owing also to the deeper instinct of pity; for the freedom of a butterfly is brief, and light wings are often crushed by the rough grasp of a relentless hand.

"Many a brave heart loved Alice Layland—from the ploughboy, whose worship could find no more poetical form of expression than a grin, to the London artist, who was rallied by the critics for the striking likeness between all the women he painted now—there were grades of devotion, from broad farce to high tragedy, but they were all alike in the fact, that one little bright-eyed tyrant could compel them to do anything her wayward fancy might dictate.

"There was not much difference in her way of treating them. She gave them bright smiles and soft words which made their hearts beat faster, and the hot blood flush to their cheeks; but she laughed at their words of love. It was not that she was coldly or deliberately selfish—she did not realise the mischief she was doing, and dismissed all unpleasant reflections with a shrug of her pretty shoulders.

"But, at last, there came some one to the village who moved Alice's heart more deeply than the rest had done. Why he did so it would be hard to say, for better men than Ernest Warwick had sought her love in vain. There was not much character in him her old admirers said, and though they would probably have thought so of any man whom she had favoured, it must be admitted that more disinterested judges said the same.

"'Did he love her?' Perhaps he did—as such men are capable of doing; he was, undoubtedly, fascinated by her beauty; he

liked to hear her talk—even when she talked nonsense; he thought more of her than he had ever done of any other women when they were absent. Therefore he told her he loved her, and won her consent to be his wife.

"Their engagement was short and bright. It is not difficult to be agreeable when one is talking to a pretty girl who idealises one's platitudes into wisdom, and one's small jests into brilliant epigrams. A loving girl like Alice, with few sterner qualities to counterbalance her affection, almost invariably indulges in this foolish tenderness. To Alice, Ernest Warwick was a hero, and he himself was perfectly willing she should think so. He would return to the little village inn (dignified by the name of an hotel) after an evening spent at the Rectory, and say to himself that he could never have believed it possible he would love any girl so much.

"He came to the village in September; she let him put a diamond ring upon her finger in October, and it was agreed that the

third of December should be their wedding-day.

"It was a bleak wintry morning, much the same as to-day has been; the cutting winds, the heavy downfall of snow, and the threatening masses of dark clouds, seemed to mock the idea of a marriage festival; superstitious old villagers shook their heads, and said such omens never failed, that the skies were always true, and that a stormy wedded life lay before them.

"But nothing daunted the spirits of the bride; even a light shadow of regret at parting with the old home scarcely passed across her face. She had no relation but her father, and he lived far more with old books and his own moody reflections, than with her. Why should she be sad, even for a moment? She was about to marry the man whom she loved; henceforth her life was to be one long dream of gladness.

"At the marriage service that day the little church was crowded; many had admired her,

some had loved her, and there were a few to whom the simple words of plighted troth meant a sentence of lifelong loneliness. But all who saw her that day admitted that Alice had never looked so beautiful, as when she left the village a bride.

"She had promised to correspond with many old friends, and at first her letters came regularly to the village, filled with praises of her husband, and repeated assurances of her own happiness. But soon these letters became fewer, shorter, and graver, even to her father. Then the old man died, and the silence between her and the village, which had once been her home, was thenceforth unbroken.

"Alice was not forgotten in Ashborough, but when her name was mentioned, it was almost always in connection with some vague rumour of her unhappiness. Such whispers were based on a slight and uncertain foundation, but they were all to the same effect— that the girl, for whose sake brave men

would gladly shed their life's blood, had married a man who was doing his best to break her heart.

"And for once rumour spoke truly. Ernest Warwick soon wearied of his fair young wife. Spoiled as she had been by universal petting, there were high possibilities in her nature, only it needed a nobler companion than her husband to lead them out.

"He grew weary of her, and made no attempt to hide the fact; sometimes he spoke to her with actual bitterness and cruelty, and even in his less sullen moods, his tone was always one of coldness and neglect.

"At night while she sat alone (for he often left her for companions who could interest him more than she, and scenes more congenial than home), she would dream of the old days when love and tenderness had been hers, and she had slighted them; and if those who had blamed her most could have seen her now, the words of reproach would have died upon their lips. She had been heartless once

they said, but they spoke falsely; she had a heart and the man she loved had broken it.

"Broken it, that is to say, if to change bright hope and gladness for an enforced endurance, is for the heart to break. Alice did not die—at first—because of the physical strength of young healthful life, and then because a new hope had sprung up in her breast.

"In course of time a child was born to her, and on this new interest in life, Alice lavished a depth of tenderness and devotion, of which those who had known her in the old thoughtless days would have believed her incapable. Life had failed, the world was not what she had dreamed it, yet joy was possible, even for her—the light touch of baby fingers upon the mother's breast drove from it the longing for death.

"But even this consolation was taken from her; before the little lips had learned to lisp the name of mother—before life's first consciousness—the consciousness of love—

had dawned, the baby died, and Alice was left to bear her weariness alone.

" And then her spirit being broken she became a pale listless woman, who cared for nothing, who bore reproaches, not from patience, but from indifference, whose only consolation was the thought of death.

" She was much to blame certainly, for sympathy is not by any means the universal heritage, and the heart should be strong enough to brave either indifference or hate ; but Alice had been trained in the school which is fatal to the healthy development of all but the highest natures—the school of general admiration. Poor child, she had been bright, happy, and frivolous once—a brilliant butterfly—and sorrow had crushed her wings.

" One night when her husband was out, a young man, whom she had known from childhood, called. They had not met for many years, and her first impulse was to réfuse to see him now. But the longing to hear some-

thing of people who had loved her, and whom she had liked once, decided her. Leicester Gray was downstairs and she would see him.

"She knew that he had loved her, and it had been whispered in the village that the wilful coquette was not indifferent to him. She had not seen him since an evening long ago, the memory of which made her pale cheeks crimson. 'I wonder if he has that lock of hair still,' she murmured as she stood before the glass.

"Sorrow, she believed, had robbed her of everything—even of beauty, and she had grown untidy and heedless of the fact; but when she glanced at the mirror it told her a different tale. 'I am beautiful still,' she thought, and she felt a sensation of triumph, doubly sweet because so long unknown.

"Leicester Gray had only just returned from abroad, and had heard no rumours of Alice's unhappiness. Excitement had restored for the moment all the old freshness to her, and Leicester read no tale of suffering in

her face. He only thought how happy Ernest Warwick must be in the possession of such a wife.

"There is no intoxication so subtle or tyrannical as the intoxication of feeling. Alice yielded herself up to the fascination of the moment—partly from coquetry; partly from the hysterical tendency to jest, in moments of great pain, from which even men are rarely quite free; partly from the natural impulse of those who are miserable, to snatch at a moment's joy, and partly from the desire of womanly pride to hide the secret of her unhappiness. She roused herself from her apathy, and became for the time as gay as Alice Layland had ever been.

"A hollow gaiety, but not hollow enough to be detected by ordinary perception. When her husband returned that night, he heard for the first time since her child died, the low ripple of her musical laughter.

"He entered the room and started at the change in Alice. He had often told her

lately, that any beauty she might once have possessed had left her for ever, but one glance at her face made such an assertion absurd.

"She could look beautiful then for other men still; her girlish wit could sparkle for them as brightly as ever, but for his approval she had ceased to care. He sat down and listened silently to all she said.

"Excitement had made Alice reckless, she could not think calmly at that moment, and even had she done so, might scarcely have been able to resist so complete an opportunity for retaliation. She talked lightly, gaily, thoughtlessly, and showed by almost every word and gesture, that she liked Leicester Gray and cared for his admiration.

"Her husband listened to their conversation in silent fury; after some futile attempts to induce him to talk, Leicester quietly ignored him. 'Let the man brood if he wants to brood,' he thought, 'I have not seen this girl for years and I *will* talk to her.'

At last, however, he rose to go, and Ernest Warwick's anger was at its height, when he saw Leicester Gray raise Alice's unresisting hand to his lips.

"When he had gone, and the husband and wife were alone together, there was a bitter quarrel between them. He, stung into passion by the unwonted effort of self-control, and by the sense of actual wrong, aggravated a thousand-fold by false suspicions, spoke with the utmost coarseness and brutality. She, on the other hand, conscious of her innocence, and a thousand far deeper wrongs which she had suffered, experienced the reaction of feelings inevitably sequent to her long silence, and retorted bitterly. This maddened him, and he ordered her with oaths to promise never to speak to Leicester Gray again.

"'I will not promise,' she said; 'let me pass, we have both of us said too much to-night.'

"He was standing with his back to the door, and refused to let her go, calling her a

name which it was humiliation for a pure woman to hear.

"'Let me go,' she said hoarsely, 'I have endured much, but before God, I vow that if you treat me like this, I will either kill myself or you.'

"She tried to push past him as she spoke, and he, mad with rage and jealousy, struck her heavily upon the breast.

"Then he left her on the floor, satisfied that brute strength had won the victory—left her fancying that his wrongs were too great even for cruelty to efface.

"When he returned to the house two hours later, Alice was unconscious; she had been for a long time in delicate health, and the evening's excitement had affected her so deeply, as to render it doubtful whether the end of this illness would be fatal or not.

"She was delirious, and Ernest Warwick was compelled to listen to her raving. Perhaps nothing that vindictive bigotry has dreamed of hell is more terrible than to hear

one's guilt reiterated in the incoherent accusations of delirium. Again and again Alice protested that she was innocent, again and again she replied to some imaginary taunt, imploring him not to strike her. Once there was a short interval of consciousness, and then she asked the doctor (turning her face away from her husband) what month and what day it was; he told her it was the second of December. She repeated the date to herself several times, as though trying to recall some faintly remembered association. At last she seemed to find it, for she said quite distinctly, 'Then I shall not die before to-morrow.'

"After this she became delirious again, but it was noticeable that her ravings now were all in connection with one idea, and that a new one. *She talked incessantly of December the third*—it had been the day when the fetters of her misery were forged—it was the day when she believed they would be broken by Death; and she had a third mental asso-

ciation with the date, they could none of them understand; her voice was indistinct, her language wild and incoherent; but one thing could be clearly inferred—she believed that the chain of coincidences would receive its last link on the third of December in some future year.

"At eleven o'clock next night she died, exactly three years after her wedding day—three years of bitter disappointment and unlooked-for sorrow, that had broken her unschooled heart.

"From that hour Ernest Warwick's friends noticed an utter change in him. They had known how indifferent he had become to his wife, and had fancied her death would scarcely even for a while, check the course of his boisterous mirth. But he shrank now from all companionship—he drank deeply, and he was detected more than once under the influence of opium.

"Such habits in a man of his age and character pointed to one conclusion, that he

struggled to escape from the dominion of a haunting idea, in which remorse had doubtless a part, but in which there was also an element of shuddering dread.

"At last his brother openly taxed him with the fact. 'Ernest,' he said, 'some secret is killing you, and the only hope I have of saving you is dependent upon your telling it to me.' Ernest Warwick attempted to deny it, but his brother continued—'I know you and your wife were not happy together; your secret has something to do with her—has it not?'

"The other sat silently, with his face buried in his hands, trembling violently. At last he said, wildly—'She haunts me; every night I see her pale and pitiless, with the air of one who waits.'

"'Waits for what?'

"'For a long-deferred revenge.'

"His brother attempted, first by jests, then by arguments, to demonstrate the absurdity of such an idea. 'Recent events have shaken

your nerves,' he said. 'This apparition is due to brooding, brandy, and opium. Now I have a suggestion to make. I suppose this unpleasant visitor is punctual—ghosts and tax-collectors always are?'

"'If you jest about it, John, I will tell you nothing.'

"'Then I will not jest about it—though really the whole affair is too absurd for serious consideration. When does the spirit come?'

"'Every night at eleven—the time she died.' The reply was given with a shudder that spoke more forcibly than any words, of the reality of the vision.

"'How long does she stay?'

"'Never longer than five minutes, and never less than two.'

"'My advice to you is to go out half an hour before the fatal time, and have a game at billiards.'

"'John,' said the other, more calmly, 'don't speak to me as though I were a fool. Even opium could never make me morbid,

and I tell you that I see her as plainly as I see you.'

"The elder brother was silent; he had no more faith in ghosts than he had in advertisements, but he saw it was hopeless to attempt to shake the other's conviction.

"Ernest Warwick continued—

"'Moreover, even if you could prove her face to be my fancy, you could not explain away her voice.'

"'Does she speak, then?'

"'Most distinctly—in her old voice, and always the same thing.'

"'What does she say?'

"'*December the third.*'

"'My dear boy,' exclaimed the elder brother, 'this is really becoming too absurd; I can see nothing in this spectral almanac but a theme for laughter. What can you see?'

"'I can see death,' was the hoarse reply. 'On the third of December I married her—on the third of December she died—on the third of December I believe she will be avenged.'

"His brother made earnest attempts to

argue him out of this delusion, to explain the apparition and the voice scientifically, but without any success whatever. He told him all the stories he could remember of delusions similar to his own, which had been proved to be baseless. It was quite in vain, and after some similar conversations on late occasions, he was compelled to abandon his project as hopeless of attainment.

"The winter, the spring, and the summer passed by, and it was easy to see that whether the idea were false or true, its influence upon Ernest Warwick became daily more and more despotic. As the anniversary of his wife's death drew near, his brother increased the vigilance of his observation, and contrived, whenever it was practicable, that Ernest should not be left alone.

"But, on the first of December, he was compelled to go to Paris by affairs of the most urgent importance; he left England most reluctantly, and, in spite of himself, with feelings of very uneasy anticipation.

"All this time Leicester Gray and Ernest

Warwick had never met each other. On the evening of December the third, Leicester sat alone in his study, watching the glowing fire and dreaming of the past.

"'Four years to-day since she was married,' he murmured to himself, 'and one year since she died, and I cannot forget.'

"The red light of the fire trembled and changed, as if with a pulsation of sympathy. Leicester watched it as intently as he had once watched the face of Alice Layland.

"'Oh, God, how I have loved her!' he thought, 'and they say he broke her heart. . . . . And to-night, while this bitter wind is wailing over the snow, I cannot conquer a childish sorrow that she should be left alone and unheeded in the cold, bleak churchyard.' Childish as the feeling is, there are moments in the lives of most men when it is strong with the power of torture. It so haunted Leicester Gray, that at last he rose from his reverie, with the determination to silence it by action. 'I will go to her grave,' he said,

'the reality cannot be worse than these haunting fancies.' It was a cold, bright night, there had been a snowstorm during the day, but that was over now; all was still and the only sound to be heard was the bleak wind moaning over the moonlit snow-drifts. The churchyard was at the extreme north of London, a solitary and deserted place at any time; it was doubly lonely and desolate now. As Leicester entered it, the church clock struck eleven, and he fancied he heard the distant cry of a human voice. He listened, but the sound was not repeated, and he concluded it must have been due entirely to his own imagination.

"He had been surprised, on entering the churchyard, to notice footprints in the snow, he was still more surprised to find that they led him like an unerring guide towards the grave of Alice Warwick. Who would visit that grave on such a night as this? The thought flashed across the mind of Leicester Gray that if they met—he and the man who

had broken her heart, beside her grave—it might be in a struggle of which the end would be death. Should he turn back? He hesitated, but the unknown power which had guided him there, and the footsteps before him in the snow, still led towards Alice's grave. 'It is the third of December,' murmured Leicester, to himself, 'the day of her marriage, the day of her death—I *cannot* pause—he killed her—and if blood must atone for blood, the choice is not mine.'

"He walked forward—to what end he could not tell—but in another moment he paused.

"The footprints led towards the grave of Alice, and there stopped.

"The moonlight fell upon the white marble cross, and also on some dark object lying in its shadow.

"What could it be? The hot thirst for blood which a mad impulse had awakened in Leicester Gray, had given place to a sick feeling of dread. 'Who was he, that he should long for the death of any man?' . . . . And

she had loved him once. He stood in the silent churchyard, trembling with vague apprehension, unable either to advance or retreat.

"Still the dark object, whatever it was, could be seen in the moonlight absolutely still.

"By a strong effort Leicester Gray staggered forward; then a low cry of horror was wrung from him, for beside the grave of the woman whom he had so deeply wronged, Ernest Warwick was lying dead."





CHAPTER V.

THE LAST SCENE OF A DRAMA'S FOURTH ACT.

"AND a very cheerful agreeable story too," said Guy, who had listened as attentively as any one. "My dear Claridas, what could possess you to inflict such a collection of horrors upon us?"

"You asked for ghosts," said Edward, with a smile, "and since you have had one, be grateful. Or if the story has bored you too much to admit of gratitude, let it be a warning to you not to demand legends made to order in future."

"I hoped you were going to give us a fight at the grave," said Guy, "a sort of modern version of Hamlet and Laertes."

"What advantage would there have been in that?"

"There is always a source of satisfaction

Briton in a fight; besides I wanted Warwick to the end, and now since in such an uncomfortable way, I can't ing a little sorry for him. I wish you publish the story."

"It is not worth publication—the world have one's most thoughtful efforts, not hasty fancies."

"It was a mistake of yours being born in nineteenth century, Claridas; your ideas would have been antiquated hundreds of years ago. I wonder how many others have such conscientious scruples."

"I am glad to believe there are many. Are you equally sceptical of your own profession's sincerity of purpose?"

"Not quite; we artists are Bohemians you know, many of us are, at all events, and faith is not quite dead in Bohemia."

"I should infer that its constitution was delicate however," said Emily, mischievously, very limited knowledge of the natives o any conclusion."

very palpable hit," laughed Guy, who

had mastered the rare art of enjoying a joke against himself. "Well, I will leave Bohemia, as Micawber left Britannia, to take her chance. My reason for wishing you to publish the story was, that I might illustrate it. A fine picture might be made of the discovery at the grave. What do you think, Mr. Vivian?"

"I think it would tax your artistic powers rather severely, Mr. Waldegrave," said Lionel, quietly. He liked Guy, but was vexed with him for jesting at a story which had seemed so real.

"Well, perhaps it would. Have you noticed a strange humility about me to-day, Miss Claridas—deeper even than usual, I mean?"

"I cannot say that I have."

"That is singular. I met a brother artist this morning, and he said to me very cheerfully, 'Have you seen to-day's *Knout;* there is a review in it of your new painting?' From his manner I inferred that an ungrate-

ful world had at last come to recognise my genius, so I hurried off to buy the paper."

"And what did it say?"

"It said the lion in it was unpleasantly like a cow."

"Now I come to think of it," said Emily, gravely, "it *was* rather like a cow."

"Emily," whispered Gertrude, "how can you be such an actress? You know how proud you were of that picture; ever since you saw it you have talked, thought and dreamed of nothing else."

Low as the whisper was, Guy overheard it.

"Thank you, Miss Renetta," he said gratefully, adding in a lower voice to Emily, "you do admire my paintings a little then?"

Emily tried to laugh the question off at first, and then said with a momentary earnestness—

"You know I do. My opinion is worth little, but I am confident you will be great some day."

And Guy felt after such a criticism, that

he could endure any chastisement from the *Knout*, though they compared his fairest fancy to the most unsightly animal in Noah's ark.

And so Gertrude's last evening in her old home passed away. When Lionel and Guy had gone home, the thought of parting which hitherto had been banished from their conversation by mutual consent, asserted itself, and would not be controlled.

Gertrude was the first to speak.

"You have been very good to me," she said, addressing them both, "if I could thank you as I ought, I would; but words seem heartless—thought is like music, it cannot be explained."

It was a frequent cause of sorrow to her that she could not convey to others an adequate idea of the intensity of her feelings, or shape her haunting fancies into words. There was always apparent in her conversation, an instinctive groping for light, and yet so earnest and pure was the search, that there

was a certain charm in the very hesitation of her utterance.

"If we are to talk of thanks, Gerty," said Edward, "it is Emily and I who should express them. The house will have lost half its brightness when you are gone."

"Will it?" She paused to linger over the sweet triumph of his praise, and then continued softly—

"You speak so because you are noble. I should be unworthy of your praise if I were not deeply grateful; I *am* grateful. You gave me a home when I was friendless, you have been generous and good always; if I have not talked about these things, if I cannot do more than mention them to-night, it is not because I am forgetful of them."

"Dear Gerty, they are not worthy to be remembered. They were cancelled long ago by a word of thanks. Let them be forgotten."

"I never forget," she said, slowly, "I will not forget them while I have life. But

these are not my most sacred remembrances of home."

She uttered the sweet old word with a pathetic tenderness, and her voice faltered at the knowledge that all this was past. Even so, many a maiden's lips have trembled at the remembered touch of other lips cold and pale long years ago.

"My deepest gratitude," she continued, "is for your chivalrous gentleness—for your unspoken sympathy; if I could serve you in any way—but to talk of this is useless, I can only be grateful and I *will* be grateful till I die. You have taught me what light means—I did not know before I came here—I understand now."

Edward answered her with the gentleness that was habitual to him. He spoke lightly of what he had done, he alluded forcibly to the happiness they had felt in her companionship.

"My poems will be dull now, I am afraid, Gerty," he concluded, "without your music

to suggest them, and Emily will find the brightest day too long without you."

Gertrude shook her head. She knew he could be great without her aid, and Emily would scarcely remember friendship in the too common selfishness of love. But she only said—

"Will you promise never to forget me? Will you think of me now and then? Will you believe always that I am loyal in my thought of you?"

"I shall always be thinking of you, darling," said Emily, in her impulsive affectionate way, "and if you come back when I am an old woman, you will find my heart just the same."

"And *I* promise, Gerty," said Edward, simply, "in all trust and faith." Even now he had no suspicion of her secret, though he had written and thought so much about the love of women. Had the parting been with his own sister he could scarcely have felt it more; but Gertrude had never awakened in

him the great love of which hearts like his are capable. Therefore he measured her feelings by his own, and read no deeper meaning in the quivering of her lips, or the trembling of her voice.

But if he could have seen her when she was again alone, seated before a mirror, unconscious how beautiful its reflection was, there would have been no light regret at his heart.

For it imaged a woman, young, beautiful and broken-hearted, with streaming black hair, and a face eloquent with the poetry of grief.

Recent events had revealed to her that her love, the deepest element of which was worship, was not so utterly unlike the loves of other women as to be free from longing and passion; but she had never dreamed she could ever become the queen of his thoughts and actions, or bear his name. She had been content to hear his voice, to be near him, to feel now and then the clasp of his hand. All

this was over now, and a pitiless future confronted her, in which even the dull consolation of undisturbed loneliness was denied her.

Early next morning her father came for her. The frigid courtesy of his bearing towards Edward and Emily was unchanged. His manner to his daughter was gentle, but touched, they fancied, by the shadow of a disappointment which was only half concealed.

The farewell was brief. A few hurried words, the repetition of old promises, not less sweet because foolishly needless; some ordinary remarks — for in real life the presence of tragical events is impotent to silence commonplace; an invitation from Colonel Renetta to Gertrude's friends, not less repellant because so faultlessly courteous, and then Gertrude and her father drove away.

The chapters in the history of life know no such thing as artistic consistency. Some of them are long and dull, some short and terrible. When the book is ended, and the finished story is perused, some pages are

found blotted with unsuspected wrong, others stained with bitter tears, and perhaps, once in the volume a poem may be written with a rhythmic music, sweet as the songs of the birds in Paradise.

But such a chapter is always brief, and no human hand can fitly record the weariness of the altered aftertime. May God pity those who have once tasted the sacramental wine of life, only to have the jewelled chalice taken away from them, by the relentless hand of Fate for ever.





CHAPTER VI.

CONSTANCE DREAMS AGAIN OF EL DORADO.

"HAVE you been working as hard as ever lately, Edward?"

"Quite as hard, Mr. Vivian."

The two men were sitting together in the comfortable little apartment which served Lionel as library, study and drawing-room. No one was more thoroughly cognisant of the fact than his landlady, Mrs. Rubblebake, who regarded visitors with unfavourable eyes, speaking of them generally as "intruding Pantiles," and testifying her displeasure on these occasions, by vigorously banging the doors. It has been suggested that Mrs. Rubblebake meant to speak of the offenders as Gentiles, but it has been argued with some

force against this theory that Mrs. Rubblebake was not a Jewess, and had no reason unduly to reverence the Jewish persuasion, seeing that her intercourse with the race was little more than a series of spirited arguments, upon the financial equivalent to old hats and dilapidated umbrellas.

"I wish," said Lionel, who was rather disconcerted by Mrs. Rubblebake's vigorous sounds of displeasure, "I wish you would rest a little."

"You are very kind," said Edward, "but you know persuasion is impossible. Let us talk of something else."

Lionel was silent for a little while, thinking of these words—was persuasion useless? It seemed so now, at all events; so he did not press the point, but said, presently—

"And your heart work, what of that? How fares the epic?"

"I finished the eighth book last night."

Lionel felt a vague and illogical regret at the reply; he had such boundless faith in

Edward's dauntless strength of will, that he could scarcely believe it possible he should die while any intense interest made life inestimably precious to him. But the claims of duty that had been so strong were growing narrower. When this work (which had cost not only toil and the protracted effort of earnest thought, but the heart suffering inevitably necessary to artistic creations of the highest kind) was finished, would the struggle end? The thought flashed through Lionel's mind with the bitterness of sudden pain; he put it from him, and said, abruptly—

"Have you seen or heard anything of Gertrude?"

"Not yet; but Emily is going to Richmond to-morrow."

"Poor child; unless she or they should alter strangely, Edward, they will break her heart."

"I am afraid they will," said Edward, thoughtfully. "Her father is so utterly unlike her, that sympathy between them, even

in the remote future, seems impossible. Perhaps love may teach him the language of her heart; but however he may strive to understand it, it will be a long task."

"Do you think she will never learn his language?"

"She will never do that—she has dreamed too long. Perhaps I am not wholly free from blame in this respect. If I could have foreseen the events of the last few weeks, I would at least have tried to prevent all the influences round her fostering her tendency to dreamy isolation, as they have done."

"I do not think your endeavours would have met with much success, though I know you are unaccustomed to failure."

"Perhaps not; regret is futile in any case. If Gerty marries a true man, there may be happiness in store for her yet. But that is rarely possible to an heiress, inexperienced and defenceless as she is."

"Will she be very rich?"

"She is certain to be. Colonel Renetta

inherited a large fortune years ago, when he left the Army, and he has had no great expenses to reduce it. Nearly all his wealth will go to Gerty; his sister is the only other relation he has living."

"And you say he does not care for her music?" said Lionel, in whose eyes this was in itself a deep offence.

Before Edward could reply, the door opened, and Constance entered the room.

"Uncle Lionel," she said, gaily, "I have been wearying to see you. I have questions to ask, and sins to confess beyond number, and then—"

She paused, seeing Edward for the first time, and blushed like a schoolgirl. If her ordinary acquaintances had failed to recognise the stately Miss Vivian, in the affectionate girl who had suddenly brightened the little room by the music of her voice, they would have found equal difficulty in discerning that self-possessed young lady as she paused and hesitated.

Edward had not heard her light footstep on the stairs, and at the first glimpse of her face there was a momentary clash of many feelings in his mind, as though a wave receding from his feet had suddenly revealed to him a long-sought secret written in the sand. He recognised Constance immediately, as the original of Guy Waldegrave's painting, which he had seen many times. "But she is far more beautiful," he thought. "How could he have misread a face like that?"

"Let me introduce you to my friend, Mr. Claridas," Lionel said to Constance. "You and he are the visitors whose coming I desire more than all others."

Constance had quite recovered her self-possession; but the mention of Edward's name nearly robbed her of it a second time. She could scarcely control an instinctive belief that he knew how she had read his poems; that he must be conscious he had the power to move her more deeply than any other man. She wondered, too, how those wild fancies

had occurred to him—through what battles with doubt, he had gained those strong and profound beliefs. Had there been any actual woman for whom he would, at the bidding of necessity, have died, as the knight in his own poem had died, at the palace gate?

But she contrived to hide her thoughts, and sat down in her usual place by Lionel's side.

The ordinary intercourse of society is a very dull and stupid affair; for it is usually little more than the interchange of obvious remarks upon subjects to which everyone is indifferent.

Constance was thoroughly well acquainted with this style of conversation. She could comment upon the heat of the room, the flowers in the conservatory, the attractions of the opera, and the surface merits of the last new novel, as well as any girl in London; but real conversation she had scarcely ever heard.

Many of the men she knew were incapable

of anything like thought, and even the more sensible among them seemed to think her far too beautiful for anything but flattery, and therefore whispered compliments they thought irresistible, but which she had so often heard before, that they had always wearied her. She had come to accept this as one of the many dull things in life, which must be endured. After all, the dandy who lisped compliments, or drawled platitudes, was not much worse than the Scotch Professor, who talked to her for an hour and a quarter on geology and the Book of Genesis; or the pale youth who informed her that he was an intellectual atheist, and enquired, while handing her an ice, what consolation remained for a shattered soul.

Edward was wholly free from pedantry, or the disagreeable habit of exclusively didactic conversation; but he could not talk naturally without talking well. With an effort so graceful and delicate as to be imperceptible, he drew Constance into the conversation

which at first was little more than light and brilliant badinage, which is only possible, in its perfection, between natures having gifts and sympathies in common.

Presently the conversation took a higher tone—a very remarkable poem had been recently published, which Constance casually alluded to, as transcendental and unreal.

Edward defended the book; he knew the author well, and was disposed to over-estimate rather than under-prize the talents of a rival. Lionel had not read the book, and the conversation was therefore wholly sustained by Constance and Edward. Lionel was a delighted listener. He was proud of them both—of the genius of his friend no less than of the beauty of his niece.

Constance was thoroughly fascinated by the argument. Love is frequently the slow growth of time, but worship is almost always rapid in its development. She had begun already to reverence his intellect, and to feel honoured by the tacit deference of his manner,

as he listened to opinions which she knew he could easily—if he had chosen—have ridiculed or refuted.

Homage was hers whenever she cared to claim it; praise of her beauty had been given her with an openness that was absolutely oppressive, and one or two young men with diminutive souls and faint moustaches, had informed her that she was "awfully clever;" but the refined courtesy of deferential chivalry is rarely offered even to a woman who is faultlessly beautiful.

As he praised his rival's poetry, she felt half inclined to tell him how she had read his own. But a natural reserve checked her. Besides, what would her praise or her thanks be to him? She had not been in his society an hour, and yet she felt already he stood on heights to which she could not climb.

This had been Claude Ravenhurst's feeling in her presence once; she was beginning to experience it herself now.

When he had gone Constance talked to Lionel with unusual gaiety, and made no reference whatever to Edward; but when she was alone in her room that night, there was an unusual light in her eyes, as of one musing over a pleasant dream.

She would have laughed with genuine amusement, if it had been suggested to her that she loved Edward Claridas—she had seen him for little more than an hour; she knew nothing of his character, and nothing more of his life than that he was a poet, and, doubtless, poor; and yet—

And yet this girl, usually so cold and reserved, recalled every word he had said, and lingered over the thoughts these remembrances awakened. She explained this by saying that he was different to anyone else whom she had known. But this hardly accounted for her taking up again the book she had not cared for, and studying minutely the character of the heroine, because he had praised her.

And that night she dreamed that she sailed in quest of El Dorado, and, more fortunate than the Elizabethan voyagers, that she discovered it, and found—not gold and jewels only, but a dreamland Paradise of rest and gladness, in which the mere sense of existence was rapture, and where every sunbeam fell upon her with the tenderness of a lingering caress.

It was a foolish dream; but it is sweet to be foolish sometimes, for there is harsh pain in the stern wisdom of reality.





CHAPTER VII.

NEW VOICES.

There is consummate ingenuity in the art with which we often torture ourselves, by contemplating the prospect of improbable evil, as though the present moment were not hard enough to bear.

If reveries over the past are foolish, as they often are, they are not so fatally certain to engender inaction, as needless anticipation of a shadowed future. There is something almost ludicrous in the way the heart endures really tragical suffering, in awaiting the occurrence of events, requiring only a little prosaic common sense to make them bearable.

It was not so with Gertrude Renetta. She had shrunk, with instinctive dread, from the

new life which presented itself to her, and her heart grew faint with silent suffering at the weariness of the dull reality.

It was not only that she had parted with the friends whom she had loved best; that the sympathy, which had become a sweet necessity to her, was hers no longer; that the people among whom her lot was now cast were strangers. These were great sorrows, and could be borne as such; but, in addition to all this, she was exposed to the misery of petty torture.

Her blindness and her secluded life had made intercourse with society an uncongenial effort to her, and new voices pained her like a jarring discord.

Colonel Renetta and his maiden sister, who lived with him, had been in the constant habit of giving large parties, and on these occasions the poor girl suffered far more acutely than she could ever have explained.

At first Gertrude had pleaded that she might remain in her own rooms on these

evenings; but to this her father would not for a moment consent. She could not dazzle his friends by her brilliance, as he would have liked his daughter to do; but she was very beautiful, and he was proud of that.

The fact of his discovering her, with many romantic additions, was widely known, and it was quite impossible that guests should come to the house without seeing the heiress.

So she had resigned herself to her father's wishes; she suffered her maid to dress her as she would—to make her black hair luminous with jewels—hearing the assurance that she was beautiful, almost with indifference.

Of course, she was flattered. If Sycorax had been an heiress, men would not have been wanting who would have assured her she was more amiable and attractive than Miranda.

Men in search of wives with fortunes, found this girl—her sadness and her romantic history adding a new charm to her beauty—a refreshing novelty after the vulgar daugh-

ters of retired tradesmen, shrewdly alive to the desirability of bartering their wealth for a title.

And from the conversation of these men, Gertrude shrank most of all. She knew the flattery given her was insincere, and was wounded by it with the humiliation of one enduring a licensed insult.

On one of these evenings, she was sitting in a corner of the room, and congratulating herself on the prospect of being forgotten for a few minutes, when Miss Jane Renetta, her aunt, sat down by her side and said in a tone that was meant to be reassuring—

"Gertrude, I am going to introduce you to a gentleman who is very rich and, whom I respect very much. Be friendly to him."

An introduction to a person so highly recommended, it might be supposed, would have been hailed with delight; but Gertrude's face expressed no such emotion—perhaps it was because so many people who were "very rich" were respected by Miss Renetta.

"Can't you wait a little while, Aunt Jane? I would so much rather be quiet for a few minutes."

"Nonsense, child," was the concise rejoinder, "I shall bring Mr. Gilbert Fernande here immediately," and Miss Renetta disappeared on the mission.

At the mention of the stranger's name Gertrude's indifference vanished. She had never met Gilbert Fernande, but she remembered his name. Perhaps he could tell her something about his cousins—it was even possible he might have a message for her from them. She awaited his coming with actual impatience.

Miss Renetta soon returned with Gilbert in triumph, and having introduced him to Gertrude, darted off to the opposite corner of the room, with the amiable intention of overhearing what George Harbourne was saying to Ida Lascelles, a young lady whom Miss Renetta by no means admired.

Gilbert took the vacant chair by Gertrude's

side, mentally congratulating himself on having so soon got rid of Miss Renetta, whose esteem was apt to be fatiguing. He could not have had a better opportunity for beginning the intimacy, for no one was sitting near them, except a deaf old gentleman who was vacantly smiling at everybody.

Gilbert's first words were skilful.

"I have been looking for this opportunity all the evening, Miss Renetta, I know you honour my cousins with your friendship.—"

"They honour *me*," she said.

He was too expert to contradict her on such a point, therefore he said quickly—

"Do you think I undervalue their regard? Circumstances have prevented my enjoying my cousin's companionship, but I have never wavered in my loyalty to him. He and I were schoolfellows, you know, and he has always been a hero of mine."

She listened with delighted interest.

"What I was about to say," he continued, "is that I shall be proud and happy if you will entrust any message to me for them."

He had watched her face narrowly all the evening, and had come to the conclusion that its expression was almost changeless. He formed another opinion now.

"Give them my love," she said, "and tell them that I do not forget them."

It was a simple message—almost a childish one—but it meant a great deal when spoken by Gertrude.

"How easy women are to read," thought Gilbert; "this girl loves him, it is easy to see that. Curse the fellow—I wonder if he cares for her. She is beautiful enough, and he is just the man to forget all practical considerations in a love affair. What a triumph it would be to rob him of her. If he really cared for her, he would feel it more deeply than losing the old miser's gold."

But he only said—

"I shall be delighted to convey the message to them; he is fortunate indeed who is affectionately remembered by Miss Renetta."

She smiled, but not at the compliment; she was thinking how the message would be

carried to her old home, as sea-divided lovers have watched the flight of birds across the waves.

Gilbert saw that he had gained an advantage, and was too wise to press it unduly. He therefore said a few more things about his cousins, taking care to speak of them with the greatest affection and respect, made one or two amusing remarks on general subjects, succeeded in making her smile, and left her with the impression that he was more agreeable than any one else who had spoken to her that evening.

"I must see more of the girl," he said to himself as he entered the billiard-room. "Old Renetta is very rich, I know, and she will have nearly everything. I burnt my fingers most confoundedly over the Derby last time; after all there's no hedging like marrying a woman with money. She's handsome, too, and as for her being blind, she's less likely to pry into affairs that don't concern her. I must think about it."

Meanwhile Miss Renetta had taken his place by Gertrude's side, and said approvingly—

"I am glad to see you were courteous to Mr. Fernande, Gertrude; he is very rich indeed."

Gertrude did not think it necessary to explain how far she had been influenced by this consideration.

"I was glad to notice it," continued her aunt, "because it was being practical. In that respect you would do well to copy me—I am always practical."

It would be well if the Church adhered as consistently to her confession of Faith as Miss Renetta. She *was* essentially practical. Generally amiable and always industrious, she did good in a small way, steadfastly refusing to recognise the possibility of any other method being better. Utterly devoid of imagination herself, she regarded the possession of that faculty as an evidence of weak intellect. In this she was by no means peculiar, for the

world is full of tailless foxes, who conscientiously believe that tails are a needless and unsightly appendage.

"You know that Major Lascelles is coming to stay here for some time?" continued Miss Renetta.

"Yes, Aunt Jane," said Gertrude, trying to feel interested in a subject for which she cared nothing.

"Well, his niece and nephew are here, too," continued Miss Renetta, more good-humouredly, "and Ida wants to know you. She asked me to bring you into the conservatory, where you could talk quietly. Will you come? Ida is there already."

"Yes, I will come," said Gertrude, more to escape from the heat and noise of the room, than from any deeper reason.

But when the two girls were alone together, Ida's first words touched Gertrude more deeply than anything else had done since she left her old home.

The words themselves were trivial enough,

but Ida had a very musical voice, and Gertrude almost exclusively founded her first impressions of people upon their voices. Moreover the thoughtless little Ida had a very tender heart, and earth has few sounds so sweet as unaffectedly sympathetic inflections of the voice.

There was a graceful deference, too, in Ida's bearing towards Gertrude, due in part to silent homage to the majesty of sorrow, and in part to a belief, influencing Ida's mind, though she was scarcely conscious of it, that there must be depths of character in a girl so beautiful, so lonely, and so sad.

"Are you very pretty?" said Gertrude, after they had been talking some time.

Ida laughed, and did not find it very easy to reply.

"No girl likes to admit that she thinks herself pretty," said she, at last. "Why do you ask me?"

"I always try to fancy what people are like from their voices; besides—"

She hesitated, but finding Ida waited for her to complete the sentence, said—

"There is a gladness in your voice when you laugh, as though you had been always loved."

There was no envy in the remark, but it had in it an almost imperceptible shade of sadness.

"Well, then," said Ida, frankly, "I confess I think I *am* pretty—just a little bit; but I'd ever so much sooner be beautiful, like you. As for being loved, I'll tell you all about that another time. Miss Montizambert didn't love me well enough, to break her heart at parting."

"Who is Miss Montizambert?"

It was a theme on which Ida could be always amusing, and she described the sedate Athena, with so much vivacity, that Gertrude yielded herself up to the fascination of the moment, and even caught the infection of Ida's laughter.

They had been talking in this way for about half an hour, when Gertrude's quick ear

caught the sound of an approaching footstep.

"Hark! who is that?"

"It is my brother," said Ida, as he entered the conservatory.

"Edgar, I am not at all glad to see you. You have spoiled a most interesting conversation."

"I plead coercion, then," said the intruder. "I was sent to inform you that universal dulness and despondency were prevalent in your absence."

"You might have spared yourself the trouble," said his sister, serenely. "Of course we knew it perfectly well before. However, since you *have* come, let me introduce you to my friend."

Edgar Lascelles was a young man of not more than two or three and twenty, with a face expressive of refinement, sensitiveness, and irresolution. He had dreamy blue eyes, fair hair, and features of delicate regularity, forming together rather a girlish type of beauty.

"Miss Renetta," he said, rather eagerly, "as I was coming through the grounds, I heard the piano touched as I have never heard it before. Were you the magician?"

"I was playing this afternoon a little while."

"You will play again, will you not? It seemed like the speech of dreamland."

"I rarely play now," said Gertrude.

"But you will play again, surely?" was the quick rejoinder. "Yours is music which makes one wish to be better."

Gertrude looked pained; she had detected already a difference between his praise and the flattery of which she was weary. But she never played now, unless she was quite alone. Colonel Renetta and his sister cared nothing for it, and she had steadily refused to play before strangers, knowing it would bring her into the prominent notice she dreaded.

Edgar saw the hesitation in her face, and read it rightly.

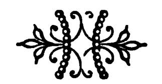
"Forgive me," he said, before she could reply, "the request was a thoughtless one. I will not ask you again, but you will permit me to thank you for the music I heard this afternoon."

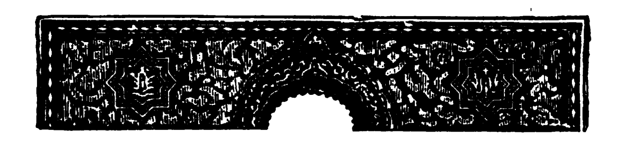
His consideration touched her; she was always tremulously alive to sympathy, and found herself so rarely understood.

She answered, actuated by a quick impulse, as he had been—

"No—forgive *me*—it was wrong to hesitate. You seem kind—and you are Ida's brother; if you really care to hear, I will play for you to-morrow, when these people—they are all strangers to me—have gone."

Edgar raised her hand to his lips as he thanked her, and then, at Ida's suggestion, they re-entered the adjoining room.





CHAPTER VIII.

DRIFTING.

Next morning, when Colonel Renetta had gone to London, and his sister was deep in the mysteries of household concerns (which, to do her justice, it must be admitted she managed with great precision and ability), Ida sought out Gertrude, with the view of continuing their conversation of the evening before.

Ida's quick sympathy—awakened when she first read the story of Gertrude's birth—had been intensified by the blind girl's grace and beauty, and she was drawn to Gertrude by the affinity, always strong, existing between two natures in attributes and developments strikingly dissimilar, yet possessing some strong heart impulse in common.

But there was another reason which prompted Ida to seek Gertrude's friendship. With characteristic quickness of perception she had discovered already that Gertrude was unhappy; that her father was incapable of understanding her; that her life, desolate through darkness, was not brightened by a great love—the only thing, perhaps, in God's universe, which is better than light.

And for this Ida considered herself to blame. From one or two words Gertrude had uttered, unconscious that they conveyed any depth of meaning, Ida had inferred with tolerable accuracy, the kind of home Gertrude had left, and she felt now as though, in bringing the unsuspected relationship to light, she had been guilty of a great wrong.

"It's just like me," she thought; "I'm always doing harm without meaning it. If I marry George I'm sure to make him miserable by some unfortunate act or other. Why couldn't I have left Miss Montizambert's cabinet alone? Any way I must find out if

Gertrude really is unhappy, and try to comfort her. She is not like any other girl I ever knew."

Ida found Gertrude alone, in a little room facing the lawn which sloped down to the river.

Light as her footstep was, Gertrude heard it.

"That is Miss Lascelles," she said, "is it not?"

"Yes, it is I, but don't call me Miss Lascelles, if you have any pity in you."

"Why not?"

"Because nobody calls me anything but Ida, and because Miss Lascelles is the name of an aunt of mine—the Major's sister—an old girl who almost fainted because she saw George kiss me."

"Who is George?"

"Oh, I'll tell you all about him by-and-bye. He's a young barrister, whom your Aunt Jane by no means approves of."

"Doesn't she? Aunt Jane talks sharply sometimes, but she is kind at heart."

"Yes," said Ida, rather doubtfully, "I suppose she is kind at heart. But her heart is in such an out-of-the-way place, and so many of the roads to it are 'No thoroughfare,' that she might almost as well have none at all. I ought to be grateful to her, for she nursed me once through a dangerous illness when everybody thought I was dying; then she was just perfect, but when I got a little better, and indulged in the tiniest bit of flirtation, to freshen me up, you know, after the long illness, she threw thunderbolts about like tennis balls."

Gertrude smiled, partly at the boldness of the simile, and partly at the idiosyncrasy in Ida's character the incident brought to light.

"And then," continued Ida, emphatically, "she's so horribly practical, and I think there ought to be a clause inserted in the Prayer Book, putting practical people in the same category with 'plague, pestilence and famine.' She always stifles me, and I want to throw the windows up."

"What windows?"

Ida laughed.

"Miss Montizambert used to tell me I was never intelligible, and that my English was a disgrace to Athens Villa. What I mean is this: when you go into a close, stifling room you want to fling the windows up and let the air in. Now, Miss Renetta is just like that. Her windows are never open, so her conversation is generally stifling, for want of moral ventilation."

Gertrude sighed rather wearily.

Miss Renetta had been very kind to her in many ways; but she had always felt like a caged bird in her society. Most of us have to endure, at some period of our lives, the stifling atmosphere of a petty soul's dull companionship; but its influence is dependent upon the nature of the character thus condemned. Some people require very little air to breathe in.

"I understand you," said Gertrude, wistfully. "Aunt Jane is very kind; but you

are right—the windows are always shut, and I can't open them."

"I should break them," laughed Ida, "if I couldn't get the fresh air in any other way."

"I can't do that," said Gertrude quietly. And Ida felt quite glad that the entrance of her brother saved her from the necessity of replying.

"Am I disturbing a cabinet council?" he said, after the first words of greeting.

"No," said Ida; "we have not had time to begin one. Read us something."

"What shall I read?"

"Oh, anything you like."

"An essay on 'Political Economy,' for instance?"

"Don't be stupid, Edgar."

"You said anything I liked. Well, never mind, I'll read over the titles of some of the books here, and you shall choose for yourself."

"Do," said Ida; "they are chiefly Miss Renetta's books, I know; so they are sure to form an edifying collection."

"'Moral Tales, by a Sunday School Teacher?'"

"No," said Ida, in a very decided tone. "Moral tales 'delight not me.'"

"Travels in New Zealand?"

Ida yawned a negative.

"'Memoir of the Late Luke Jinkerboy, of Blessed Memory, with an Original Tract by the Editor?'"

"The very titles are fatiguing," said Ida. "I'm sorry I asked you now."

"You are difficult to please, Miss Ida. However, here is a charming little volume, which is quite my ideal of light reading."

"What is it called?"

"'Forty-eight Sermons, Conclusively Proving the Heresy of Every Sect but One, by the Reverend Andrew McSwab, D.D., of Glasgow.'"

"What an unnatural monster of a brother you are to suggest such horrible things! Have you nothing that may possibly keep us awake?"

"You surely don't consider the last work dull," said Edgar, replacing the ponderous volume. "There's nothing here particularly attractive. Stay, though; I have a book in my own room which will interest Miss Renetta, I think, and you too, if Athens Villa has left you any soul at all."

"Really?"

"Really."

"What is it called?"

"It is a volume of poems by Edward Claridas."

"Will you read that book to us, Mr. Lascelles?" said Gertrude, eagerly.

"Do you know the name, Gerty?" said Ida. "I have never heard it before."

"Mr. Claridas is not very popular," said Edgar, finding Gertrude did not immediately reply; "but his name is very well known in literary circles. I have not read any of his other works; but the poems I am reading now are singularly beautiful."

"Bring them down at once, then. What

did you menace us with those dreadful works for, when you had a book like that upstairs?"

"I had forgotten it, but I will bring it now."

Edgar soon returned with the book, (it was the same one Lionel had lent Constance) and Ida and Gertrude composed themselves to listen.

Edgar Lascelles read well. He had the great natural advantage of a good voice, capable of varied modulation and inflection, and that morning he had the first requirement of good reading—a thorough appreciation of his author.

He certainly had also the encouragement of an attentive audience, for Ida soon became deeply interested, while the poems had the same influence on Gertrude that music had—that of an absolutely tyrannic fascination. She had heard them before; some of them she almost knew by heart; but the freshness of an unchanging enthusiasm is more intense than the freshness of mere novelty.

Moreover, they were sacred to her by the power which can make stone or bricks a temple or a home—the consecrating influence of associated ideas. She could scarcely keep back the tears which started to her eyes; but they were tears of pride and sweet remembrance, not of sorrow.

Edgar watched her face narrowly. He felt a strange interest in this girl, so beautiful, and lonely. Nothing is so rapid as the transition from one shade of feeling to another. In Edgar's mind pity had become sympathy, and sympathy was fast deepening into a stronger emotion.

As he watched her face, and saw how it changed at the words he was reading, he at once inferred they were indications of rare qualities of heart and mind; a very ordinary mistake, for almost every man idealises the characters of beautiful women until his hair is grey.

He was more utterly, though very naturally, mistaken, in appropriating a share of

her interest to himself. If he had only known in those early days the reason why her long dark eyelashes were wet, it might have saved him many a heartache in after years.

When at length he closed the book Ida exclaimed—

"I never knew I was so fond of poetry before; you must read to us every morning, Edgar. If I were not afraid of making you vain I should tell you that you read well.

But Gertrude merely said—

"Thank you, Mr. Lascelles; you have made me very happy."

He had thought her cold; and the unaffected sincerity of her words made his face flush.

"Will you give me an undeserved reward, Miss Renetta?" he said.

"I would if I could," she answered, with a smile; "but I am afraid I cannot."

"Yes, you can, if you will only fulfil your promise to play to me."

Gertrude assented readily. She had begun to like both Edgar and his sister very much. They were different to other people, she thought; they did not pain her by coarse pity, nor weary her with the discussion of subjects for which she cared nothing. Moreover, that morning's reading had created a new bond of sympathy between them. What maiden would not feel gently towards a messenger who had sought her out and brightened her long, uncheered loneliness with a message of love?

So she was glad of any way in which to thank him, and music had always been her favourite mode of speech, as poets have written their secrets in their records of dreamland. She played until she forgot her altered surroundings—conscious only of a great enthusiasm and a dominant love.

"Praise would be impertinent," said Edgar, when at length she ceased; "but you cannot, I think, be indifferent to the fact that you have given so much pleasure."

Gertrude looked pleased.

"I am very glad," she said. "You have made *me* happy this morning. I did not think you would care so much for my poor musical fancies. They are wild and erratic. I do not understand the science of music at all."

"Will you play to us again Miss Renetta? We shall be here for three or four weeks, in all probability."

"I will play for you as often as you like if you will never ask me to play before strangers," said Gertrude, frankly; "and will you read to Ida and to me again, as you have done this morning?"

"Gladly."

When Colonel Renetta returned home that evening, he was surprised and delighted to notice the change in Gertrude. She had been very poorly during the last few weeks, and a physician, whom he had consulted concerning her, while evading a direct reply, had admitted that there was an unmistakably consumptive tendency in her constitution.

"Why Gerty," he said, kissing her, "the spring seems to have touched you with its sunshine. Last night you were a snowdrop, this evening you are a rosebud."

"Ida is the powerful sunbeam," said Gertrude, glad to give her father any cause to praise her. He so rarely spoke to her in this way, that he looked round the room now to see if any one was laughing at him, being uncertain whether the words he had spoken were absurd or not.

"Well, I am glad of the result at all events," he said, "whatever may have been the cause. I had begun to think a few months in Italy would do you good, but now—"

"It is quite unnecessary father. This is May—the summer will be soon here now."

And for the next few weeks every day resembled more or less closely the one just described. Sometimes Edgar rowed the girls on the river, Ida steering, and after the first week George Harbourne made their party complete by his presence, for an old

relation of his, having had the good taste to make a will in his favour, and then to exchange this world for a better, Major Lascelles had suddenly discovered that he had always loved him, and that there was no man living to whom he would more readily entrust the happiness of his niece.

George and Ida were not more selfish than most lovers, but of course they thought more of each other than of Gertrude or Edgar, who were in consequence almost always virtually alone together.

And during these May mornings Edgar learned to hold Gertrude's companionship the most precious thing the world could give—to listen to the musical tones of her earnest hesitating voice, and to long, as his supreme ambition, for the right to defend and protect her always.

She never contemplated even the possibility of this; she knew she might be wooed as an heiress, but she had never thought of being loved as a queen. The ordinary aims and

ambitions of women had never been hers, and she had been accustomed to receive pity in place of the homage, which is the undisputed heritage of every girl whose face is fair.

And these mornings with Edgar and Ida were the only consolation left her now, for every day made it more certain that sympathy, or even unruffled companionship, between her father and herself was impossible. Their dispositions were diametrically opposed, their training had been widely different, and, as a natural result, their ideas were constantly clashing. He would often moodily remark to his sister—who, kind hearted as she was, was far too practical to allow abstract considerations to influence her in arriving at any conclusion, and therefore invariably agreed with him—that the girl wasted her life in mad dreams, and was without the natural affection of a daughter. Gertrude, on the other hand, often wronged her father by believing him to be as cold in heart as he was in manner, and fancying that he cared

no more for her than the fortune hunters, whose shallow flattery stung her with the bitterness of humiliation.

The world is full of these anomalies. Many a home is miserable because most natures are incapable of recognising the fact that they are ignorant concerning the lives which mingle with their own. Human life is very like the childish game of cross questions and crooked answers, and if the power of evil were indeed the sneering cynic Goethe depicts him, the ordinary intercourse of father and child, of friend and friend, of husband and wife, the intellectual giants, who are set to grind corn, and the pigmies, whose destiny calls them to rule an empire, would furnish him with rare food for mocking mirth.

"A mad world my masters," and a sadly disordered and entangled one. We who dare amid direst confusion to believe in God, hold that the riddle is not without a clue, but only in the light of heaven through the endless ages of eternity, will it at last be found.



CHAPTER IX.

TWO ANSWERS.

IT might have been supposed, having succeeded in winning a great fortune (the possession of which was sweetened by the knowledge, that it would in the ordinary course, have been inherited by a man whom he hated with the implacable bitterness of masked envy), that Gilbert Fernande would have been content.

But the Russian fable of the unsatisfied peasant, whose wallet Fortune filled with gold, is being re-enacted every day, and the thirst of a Good Templar at a tea meeting is nothing to the insatiable craving for wealth in the minds of men, whose improved version of the Catechism runs thus—"Man's chief

end is to glorify *gold* and to enjoy it for ever."

This maxim, or something exactly identical in principle, had been the guiding star of Gilbert Fernande's life. His father had been a Yorkshire farmer—a Wesleyan Methodist local preacher, who held the hottest doctrines and drove the coldest bargains—who was positively effervescent with Hallelujahs at the meetings, but was generally engaged in silent prayer when the plate was handed round for gratuitous contributions. This man with a characteristic blending of piety and prudence had married Emma Claridas because, as he pithily remarked, she was "a handmaiden of the Lord with five hundred a year." She was twelve years his senior, and not very attractive in the eyes of carnal judges, but spiritual communion is sweet, and there was perennial comfort in the reflection that she was "as good to cuddle and kiss as a lass that had nought."

Gilbert was their only child, and proved

an apt pupil, in the facility with which he comprehended and embraced the parental tenets. At eighteen he was left an orphan, to struggle with the world—a very vigorous and clear-headed orphan—who fully intended to win the battle.

At heart he and his father were wonderfully alike, but the son's superior talents, improved by culture and education, prevented the resemblance from becoming superficially evident. Both men loved money better than anything else, and both were cunning; but Gilbert was too selfish to be a miser, and too clever to cant. He had a vaster game to play than his father, and it suited his purpose better to be an Evangelical Churchman, whose piety was ardent enough to establish his reputation for respectability, without ever becoming so zealous as to be reproachfully emphatic.

This was Gilbert Fernande, who had first contrived by insinuation and falsehood to widen the breach between Edward Claridas

and his father, and had then succeeded by judicious craft and patient industry in putting himself in the place thus rendered vacant; who had played his cards so well, as to gain the old man's fortune, and who now, true to his golden ethics, wished to increase it by a marriage with Gertrude Renetta.

He did not at all deceive himself as to his motives, and felt no conscientious scruples about the worthiness of the course he was about to take. He was rich, but his one great folly, that of betting largely at races without understanding anything about them, made pecuniary disaster far from impossible. Gertrude had wealth, and was less likely than any woman he knew to be troublesome or inquisitive about his method of spending it, therefore he decided, after a few interviews, that he would marry her.

But it is one thing to arrange the plan of a siege, and quite another to enter the city gates in triumph.

> She's beautiful and therefore to be wooed;
> She's a woman therefore to be won,

is epigrammatic, but no guide is so deluding as an epigram, and Gilbert found Gertrude harder to win than gold.

Her first impressions of character were rarely at fault, but for once they had been wholly so. This was not strange, for in their first interview he had spoken merely of the friends whom she loved best, and she had therefore thought of him only as their cousin; directly he had claimed regard in any other capacity he had failed, and she had begun to dislike and mistrust him.

He was not easily discouraged, and nearly every evening he was at Colonel Renetta's house, trying to win this second trick in the game of financial success he was playing. Their intimacy did not take the course he had anticipated, but he at length decided on a bold step; he had the approval of her father, he knew he had a warm partisan in her aunt, who was genuinely fond of him, besides the admiration for his wealth, natural to so practical a woman. He was weary of this fruitless strategy; he thought her too weak to

resist the wishes of her relations, and determined to challenge her decision at once. After all it mattered little whether she loved him or not—the thing he desired was not her heart, but her promise to become his wife.

One evening, early in June, he found her alone in a summer house in the garden. Edgar and Ida had agreed to meet her there, and take her for a farewell row upon the river, for they were to return home next day.

"Miss Renetta," he said, taking the seat by her side, "I am fortunate in finding you alone."

She had come to shrink from the very sound of his voice, especially when he softened it as he did now.

"I am waiting for my friends, Mr. Fernande," she said, trying to repress her annoyance at his presence, "they will be here directly, so you need not mind leaving me alone; I believe my father is in the house."

The polite dismissal was not encouraging,

but he made it serve his present purpose by replying—

"I have seen him, and have his warm approval in what I am about to say. My visit to-night is to you. What I would ask is your companionship, not merely in this garden for half an hour, but in my home for ever."

He had intended speaking more passionately and attempting to touch her heart, but he was not the first man who had found it difficult to lie in her presence.

She answered coldly—

"Companionship is painful where there is no regard—"

He interrupted her quickly—

"Do you doubt that you possess my regard, Miss Renetta?"

She replied with quiet scorn—

"I have never asked myself the question."

"Accept my answer to it, then. You have my regard—my love absolutely and for ever."

She knew his words were false, and her

answer was in the same cold indifferent tone, which he felt it so difficult to encounter, from the fact that it was different to anything he had expected.

"Permit me to test it by a request. It is that this subject may be considered over between us—for ever."

"Forgive me, Miss Renetta, but I cannot accept your test. You will scarcely, I think, act in direct opposition to your father's wishes, and—"

"I yield my father freely a daughter's obedience in matters where he has a right to control me, but it is for myself to decide whether I shall listen to words like yours or no."

Her whole manner seemed changed. In place of the hesitating diffident speech of a dreamy girl, she spoke with the disdain of an offended woman. Gilbert began to be really angry; defeat at any time is hard to bear, but ignominious defeat is maddening; and to be spoken to thus by a girl whom he 1 looked down upon. He said quickly—

"You speak as though I had insulted you."

"Words like yours are always either an honour or an insult. If they are true they are an honour, but—"

"You believe them to be false then?"

"I challenge you to tell me that you love me."

He cowered before her contempt and hesitated. She said with quiet triumph—

"You cannot, and I have therefore a right to forbid you to speak to me on such a theme as this again. I have heard you, sir, perhaps you will be equally forbearing now, and leave me."

He answered desperately, conscious that he was playing his last card—

"You speak proudly, Miss Renetta, but power does not rest with you alone. An isolated resistance is always difficult, it would be almost impossible for *you*."

She did not falter at the implied threat, but said slowly—

"And to gain your end, you would use my

father's will as an instrument to force consent from my unwilling lips—is that your meaning?"

He mistook her altered tone for one of fear, and answered with returning gaiety—

"All is fair you know, pretty one, in love or war, and between us there seems likely to be both. If you are wise you will not defy me."

She did not speak, and he continued in the same tone, convinced that he could not win her heart by flattery, but thinking it possible he might gain her obedience by intimidation and the assumption of power.

"We will not quarrel, it would be very silly. But I will leave you to consider whether it is pleasant to be petted by a lover, or crushed by a foe. There's a problem for you, Gerty, you shall give me the answer next time we meet."

The pet word from his lips stung her into an immediate retort.

"How hard it is for a traitor to be always masked. I have long believed you to be

false, but to-night you have declared your own baseness in the coarsest words."

"You defy me then?"

"I do. You can bring nothing on me worse than unhappiness. I can bring shame upon you."

"How?"

"I can tell your cousin, whom you profess to honour, and in whose name you spoke to me first, what you have said to-night, and let him know that he wastes his trust upon a traitor."

"Curse the fellow," muttered Gilbert to himself, "the girl loves him, and my game is lost. At every stage of my life he crosses my path and baffles me, but revenge will be all the sweeter and all the heavier at last, for such defeat as this."

Gertrude had risen, and now said imperiously—

"I command you to go—it is humiliation for a woman to speak to a man whom she despises."

He felt that his last card had failed, and left her without another word.

She stood, with no change in her expression of calm disdain, for some moments after the sound of his footsteps had died away; then she felt the reaction succeeding an outburst of unwonted emotion. Sinking down into her former attitude, she buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

It was not merely for the sake of wounded pride, or even from the bitter sense of wrong. It was because this man's threats had forced upon her the consciousness of lonely helplessness—because it had recalled, with the irony of a mocking contrast, the time when she was never wounded even by a careless word.

So deeply was she absorbed in her own thoughts, that she did not hear the approaching footstep of Edgar Lascelles. He had come to fetch her to go with them on the river, but seeing at once that something was wrong, he persuaded George Harbourne and

Ida to go without them, saying that Gertrude did not feel inclined for rowing, and that he should stay at home, too. Ida had some conscientious scruples whether it was not selfish for her to go under these circumstances; but a row on the Thames by moonlight, when the month is June and the boatman is a lover, is too tempting a prospect for a girl of eighteen to relinquish. So Edgar gained his point, and returned to the summer-house alone.

Gertrude had not moved, but she recognised his footstep, and, smiling through her tears, held out her hand with a word of welcome.

"Something has grieved you," he said, gently. "May I not try to help you?"

The sympathy was natural and commonplace enough, but simple words are strangely eloquent when the heart is weary with the sense of lonely pain. Gertrude had felt forsaken and alone, but his presence inspired her with a vague sense of relief, almost like a lost child's gladness at the sound of a familiar voice.

She answered, in a tone of quieter sadness—

"You have helped me already by your unspoken sympathy. You can do no more; but that is much, and I am grateful for it."

She did not know how her voice affected him; she could not see how the hot blood crimsoned his face; she did not dream that her words awoke a wild hope which made his heart beat faster.

"But you are sad this evening; dear Miss Renetta—Gertrude, will you not honour me with your confidence?"

She did not attach any deep meaning to his utterance of her Christian name. His discarding the more formal style of address seemed natural at a moment when he was trying to comfort her, especially seeing that their pleasant companionship was so soon to cease.

"I was lonely and dull," she said, trying to speak lightly. "But it is nothing—or, if it was anything, Edgar, it is gone now."

She did not fancy he would attach more

significance to her use of his Christian name than she had done to the fact of his calling her Gertrude. But at that moment, while he was trembling with the sweet uncertainty of new hope, the word thrilled him into the utterance of thoughts which he had striven, if not to repress, at least to hide.

He told her that he loved her—with the fluent utterance a great worship so often inspires—in the burning words of one too inexperienced to know that this supreme emotion is as old as humanity, and fancying no heart has ever throbbed with such infinite longing before.

She listened with something of womanly pride, perhaps, for she knew every word was sincere, but with far more bewilderment and pain. As he told her all his secrets, she recalled many words and actions that might have revealed it to her before. But she had never suspected it, believing her life was too poor and darkened a thing to be crowned with the homage of a great love.

At last he paused, and she said, raising her face entreatingly to his—

"Forgive me, if I have wronged you. I never dreamed of this. What was *I* that you should love me?"

"You have not wronged me," he replied. "If you cannot give me a word of love, I will never charge you with that. I am not worthy of you, I know; but will you not try to love me a little?"

"I *do* love you, Edgar," she said, her voice pathetic with unspoken pleading that she might be understood. "No one has been so good, so chivalrously gentle to me as you, since I left home. But you are worthy of a woman's undivided love, and that I cannot give you."

"Have you given it already?"

She trembled and hesitated; then he heard her whispered answer—

"Yes."

There was a long silence between them. Then he said, rather huskily—

"If you had been free in thought as well as in life, would your answer have been different?"

She hesitated. She had never contemplated the possibility of any love, other than the one which had swayed her life from childhood, and it seemed to her almost like treachery to do so now; and yet she felt a strange tenderness for Edgar Lascelles, that she could not have explained.

At last she said—

"I cannot tell. Perhaps, had all been different, it might have been."

He held those words in his remembrance for ever. They were merely the admission of a faint and distant possibility, but men have treasured slighter wealth than this, through the solitude of faithful years.

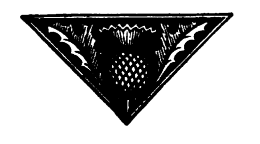
There was another long silence between them. Then Gertrude said—

"Are you angry with me, Edgar? Do you think me heartless?"

He did not answer her in words, but he

raised her hand to his lips, and, with a murmured "God bless you, darling," left her.

Earth's harmonies are often sweet as the songs of Paradise, but such strains are almost always fragmentary and incomplete.





CHAPTER X.

"YELLOW BOOTS."

A FAITHFUL biography, which should record the minutest details of a life—which should describe long dull days, when gladness took no more exhilarating form than constrained satisfaction, and pain no sublimer aspect than weariness—would be a strange book. It would be great if it were only true, for it would accomplish what has never been done before—the perfect delineation of a human soul; but it would be intolerably dull to every reader but the compiler of a railway time-table, or the editor of a religious newspaper.

For a greater or less portion of every life is trivial. Romeo cannot *always* be uttering impassioned words beneath Juliet's window.

Hamlet cannot *always* be conversing with murdered relations from the unknown world; but tragedy, to be interesting, must be palpable to careless observation; so the world declines to recognise the vulgar side of heroic existence at all. Who can blame it? There is dreariness enough in its own life already.

And yet there is tragedy wherever a brave young spirit struggles, in spite of discouraging realities, after a high ideal; and this was the life of Constance Vivian.

She was so beautiful, that all the men whom she met tacitly refused to recognise the fact that she might possibly have other gifts as well.

Her former dream of El Dorado had been of a golden land, where happiness was the attained—not as now the vainly longed-for—end of life. Now her ambition was rather heroism than gladness, though something of the old desire still lingered in her mind—as old creeds always do in a church or a society,

long after they have been publicly renounced as false.

But what heroism was possible to her? Her father regarded all aspiration, except the striving after material comfort and social reputation, as fanatical folly. Her mother dozed over medical works and nauseous prescriptions. Lord Ravenhurst, the only friend she had ever had, was far away, and no one else seemed able to help her in the attempt to arrive at a solution.

Lionel's heart was not hollow, nor were his beliefs stereotyped; but he knew himself that he was incapable of understanding her. Moreover, he lacked the very thing she worshipped—strength; his was the steadfastness of unwavering loyalty, not of resolute control. Therefore, though she was much with him, to Lionel's gratification, and Mrs. Rubblebake's undisguised disgust, she rarely spoke to him of the secret struggles in her heart.

One evening, her father, who since Lord Ravenhurst had briefly informed him that the

engagement between himself and Constance was over, had been in a condition of chronic discontent, came home serenely smiling, as though his lost Paradise had been regained.

"You have not forgotten Sir William Ecklevey's dinner party to-night, have you, Constance?"

"I thought you had made some excuse for me," she said. "A dinner party in July is fatiguing even to think of. One ought to be away somewhere by the sea, reading a novel."

"Don't be silly, Constance. You ought to think it an honour to be invited to Sir William's house, after that brilliant speech of his last week; it nearly upset the Government."

"Sir William has great facility in the manufacture of brilliant speeches," said Constance, rather dryly. "I have seldom read anything finer than his defence of Lord Efgerson in that disputed will case, or heard anything more candid, than his admission at

dinner that evening, that not a word of it was true."

"Nonsense," said her father, rather impatiently; "if you knew anything about the law, you would know that a counsel has no individual voice in these matters; he simply acts in accordance with his instructions. Any way, Sir William gives very good dinners, and I'm going to-night. The question is, will you come with me?"

"Yes," said Constance, after a momentary hesitation, during which her own inclination struggled with a desire to please him; "if you wish it, of course I will go."

So they went accordingly, and Sir William Ecklevey, who, in spite of his rapidly growing legal and political reputation, was far from invincible to the charm of a lovely face (a fact which must have rendered his wife's form and features far from consoling to him), received her very cordially.

She was taken down to dinner by a wealthy solicitor, whom she had met at Sir William's

house before; a man of agreeable manners, and considerable conversational powers; one of the few individuals who have mastered the rare art of being comfortable in a decidedly uncomfortable world. He knew everybody; was as thorough a master of his profession as any man in London, and was remarkably well informed on general subjects. For the rest, he was a bachelor of fifty, with a pleasant face and an agreeable voice.

"Did you read Sir William's speech in the House last week, Miss Vivian?" he said, after a few unimportant remarks.

"No," said Constance; "you are not in the House, Mr. Argerven, so you will not be offended if I confess that Parliamentary speeches make me sleepy."

"Certainly," said Mr. Argerven, "my dear Miss Vivian; you show your good taste by the observation. Besides, women should never be politicians; there would be an end to all public honesty if they were. Beauty like yours would have undermined the integrity of Burke himself."

"Isn't that rather a threadbare compliment?" said Constance, laughing. "I have heard it so many times, with slight variations, that it is really strange I am still so far from believing it."

"You are cynical, Miss Vivian," said the lawyer, good naturedly. (Perhaps he owed his success in life to nothing more than his never-ruffled temper, and his ready perception of a joke made at his own expense.) "Well, men are not always sincere, it must be confessed; but, after all, what I said was true. If you were a barrister, I'd employ you for counsel sooner than I'd have Sir William himself."

"Thank you; I'm sorry I can't avail myself of your partiality. I am rather doubtful, too, concerning English judges' susceptibility."

"You think them too old?"

"A man need not be old to be blind to every influence but self-interest."

"What a severe thing to say! May I ask what induced you to utter that last opinion?"

"I was watching the face of that young man sitting near my father."

"Which one?"

"The young man with the dark hair and restless eyes. Who is he?"

"How would you read his character?" said Mr. Argerven, with a shrewdly observant glance at her face.

"I cannot read much in his face; but I should think he was false and selfish. Who is he?"

"How sharp these women are," thought the lawyer, adding aloud—"You are imprudent to pass an opinion so candidly. Mr. Fernande might be a friend of mine, for aught you know to the contrary."

"Is that his name?"

"Yes; he is a City merchant, and far too rich to be disrespectfully spoken of. His uncle was John Claridas; you may have heard your father mention his name."

"I have heard the name before," said Constance, in some surprise; "but not from him."

"Ah, I suppose you've read some of those strange poems by Edward Claridas. Have you?"

"Yes."

"I thought so; and you admire them?"

"Very much."

Constance wanted to hear more, but did not feel inclined to be communicative herself.

"Yes; I don't wonder. You would scarcely believe that *I* have read them, too, and been as completely fascinated as a school-girl. I know Edward Claridas very well. He is a fine young fellow; one can't help admiring him, and he has brilliant abilities. But he's quite mad."

"In what way?"

"He's not content with writing poetry; he tries to live it. Now, every sensible man knows that it's impossible."

"For everyone?" said Constance, wistfully.

"It may be possible for you, my dear Miss Vivian," said Mr. Argerven, gallantly. "If

I were not afraid you would laugh at me again for the repetition of trite compliments, I should say that a face like yours could convert even a matter-of-fact old man like myself to transcendentalism; but in sober earnest, every practical man keeps the dreams of other men in his book-case, and his own dreams—if he has any—in his writing-desk, and takes the world for the dull, doubtful, dingy affair it is, without trying to alter it. I suppose you don't read Carlyle?"

"I have read 'Sartor Resartus,' but it bewildered me. You did not learn your complaisant creed from him I fancy?"

"No; Carlyle is as mad as Claridas. I was thinking about a passage in his 'Life of John Sterling,' where he describes the world as saying to a man who desires to lead a noble life—'Nonsense, noble life is at Drury Lane, and wears yellow boots.' Now, I think that's sound common sense; but Claridas won't leave heroism to Drury Lane."

"You know you admire him for it," said Constance; "although you do echo the popular cant of despising honour."

"Well, perhaps I do," said Mr. Argerven, rather flattered than otherwise by the remark; "because he's always so quiet about it. Half the men who live Drury Lane ethics take good care to wear the 'yellow boots' as well. He never does."

"But you said he was mad. What are the proofs of his 'alleged lunacy?' I think that is the correct legal phrase, and I never dine here without fancying myself in Court."

Mr. Argerven laughed.

"The conversation *is* rather dismally suggestive of red tape and musty parchment," he said. "I am indebted to you, Miss Vivian, for introducing something more agreeable. But you asked what he had done that was mad, and I answer—everything."

"Everything?"

"Almost everything. He might have been a rich man if he had liked, for his father had

immense wealth; but he managed to quarrel with him about some lofty idea or other, and let his cousin, young Fernande, slip into his place, which, not being a Transcendentalist, our friend with the restless eyes—confound him—contrived to do. That was his first mad move."

"And then?"

"Not content with a single-handed battle with the world, he must support his younger sister, too—a very pretty little girl; but that was no reason why she shouldn't shift for herself, or, better still, have stayed with her father."

"Perhaps he loved her," said Constance.

"I dare say he did, and I forgive him that, mad as it was. But his next insane step was past all excuse. A schoolfellow of his sister's, a blind girl, was suddenly left in the world without a friend. So, though he was as poor as a crow already, he opened his home to her."

"I wish madness like that were a little commoner," said Constance, impulsively.

She felt almost envious of this girl whom he had befriended. Would it not be worth while to be blind, destitute, and defenceless to win such tenderness?

Mr. Argerven continued, without heeding her interruption—

"And after all this you will not be surprised to hear that he carries the same Utopian principles into his daily life. How he manages to live is a mystery to me; by mere copying, I fancy—I have often detected his handwriting on deeds. He is clever enough to be anything; but what's the good of genius if a man can't shut his eyes sometimes? I've thrown a little work in his way now and then, and he has done it brilliantly; but it was a fatal mistake his ever entering the law at all."

"Do you seriously think a barrister should say what he knows to be false?" said Constance, meeting, as she expected, the conventional reply—

"That is putting the ordinary action of a

counsel in a very severe light, Miss Vivian. I will not say absolutely that; but every cause has rights of some kind, and no one expects in an advocate the impartiality of a judge."

"You do not believe in your heart that truth is a toy for sophistical platitudes to play with," said Constance; "and I will prove it by a test!"

"What is it?"

"Which man would you sooner make your friend; which man would you sooner appeal to in any emergency—the poor poet, who is mad enough to be loyal to his high creed of stainless honour, or his clever cousin, who has won the game, if the prize be money?"

"I will never play a game of verbal chess with you again, Miss Vivian," he said, laughing, "if you press a point so mercilessly as that. You anticipate my reply rightly. Claridas is a fine fellow; his only mistake was in being born three hundred years too late, or too soon. He would have been better at home,

I fancy, at the Mermaid Club, than he is at Westminster Hall; but I confess frankly I don't like his cousin."

"You are better than your creed, Mr. Argerven," she said.

And he answered, rather sadly—

"No, I am not. In our profession one is obliged to aim low sometimes, or fail; and I prefer to aim low. Thank you for your good opinion, however, Miss Vivian; perhaps if a few more people had believed in me it might have been a true one. But our conversation is getting too grave for a dinner party. When do you leave London?"

And so the conversation drifted into generalities, until the ladies went into the drawing-room.

Here an attenuated old lady entertained Constance, with a long account of her first ball, laying great stress on the fact that she danced three times on that occasion with a young marquis, who afterwards hanged himself.

Constance had become very proficient in the difficult art of encountering this class of conversation. She contrived, by the judicious utterance of occasional monosyllables, to convey the idea that she was listening with rapt attention, but suffered her thoughts to wander at will. Mr. Argerven's words had awakened in her heart a strange pride and gladness she could not very easily have explained.

What was Edward Claridas to her, that she should triumph in criticism that was worth more than any praise? He cared nothing for her; they might never meet again, and yet—

And yet it was sweet to think she had ever met a man whose life seemed to be a realised ideal. The supreme quality in manhood she worshipped was strength, and this she had found in his writings. Was there no triumph in the discovery that it throbbed also through his life? in the knowledge that what men thought his strained and antiquated honour

was the basis of his daily work? that he lived out the truths he wrote, instead of accepting conventional ethics, even when they seemed to constitute the edict of necessity? that he could breast the strongest current, while others drifted idly with the stream? that he could be steadfastly great in thought and action, amid the vulgar reality of prosaic poverty, and the tedium of uncongenial work? This *was* a triumph, even though she should never hear his voice again; and Constance found herself wandering in a world of fancy, certainly not suggested by the account of Mrs. Ebbleberry's first ball.

Her reverie was checked by a song, the notes of which were so weird and plaintive that they shadowed her thoughts with a vague sadness, like the silenced gaiety of a child, when a passing cloud removes the sunny glitter from a stream. The singer was a young girl, with a voice so clear and distinct, that Constance almost fancied the simple words were murmured to her alone.

This was the song :—

A rosebud murmured—" The flow'rs around
  Will wither and fall unseen;
But lovers' whispers my leaves have crowned,
  And poets have throned me queen.
I shall bloom in a maiden's sunny hair,
  Or blush on her soft white breast,
Where Death itself will be rapture rare,
  By her lingering touch caressed.

" In a jewelled casket's fond embrace,
  'Midst treasures she most doth prize,
My faded leaves she will softly place,
  With a smile in her deep blue eyes.
With letters o'er which she loves to dream,
  Recalling the vanished days;
And graceful ballads, whose constant theme
  Is ever her beauty's praise."

But a holier fate than the rosebud dreamed
  In the morn of her wayward will—
Was hers; for at night, when moonlight streamed
  On the earth so hushed and still—
On the leaves of a rose in tranquil rest
  The pitying beams were shed;
But they lay on the pure and stainless breast
  Of a maiden cold and dead.

As the song ended, some of the gentlemen entered the room, and Mr. Vivian came and sat down beside his daughter.

" Constance," he said, in a tone partly of affectionate pride, partly of one speaking with the determined intention, that a newly-

initiated course of action shall be successfully carried out, "you have made a conquest."

"Have I?" she said, laughing. "I was not conscious of it. Is that old gentleman, with the astonished eyes, who sat opposite to me at dinner, the enamoured youth? If so, tell him to take to playing the flute; it might ease his heart."

"Don't be flippant, Conny. The old gentleman with the astonished eyes, as you irreverently call him, is worth ten thousand a year. But I wasn't alluding to him. Did you notice a very handsome young man, with dark eyes and hair, sitting near me?"

"No," said Constance, "I thought your companions were nearly all monotonously plain."

"Mr. Fernande was not; there he is standing by the piano."

Constance gave a quick glance at her father, divining instinctively his thought, and the motive from which his anxiety that she should come to this dinner party, had sprung.

"He wishes to know you, Conny," said

Mr. Vivian, hurriedly, seeing she was about to speak; and without giving her any opportunity to reply, he crossed to where Gilbert Fernande was, with whom he returned, after a few minutes careless conversation.

"The old gentleman with the astonished eyes" came up at this moment, and without the slightest preface, plunged Mr. Vivian into a discussion on a recently discovered coal mine. The interest of this grimy theme being of a somewhat exclusive character, they naturally drew their chairs a little aside, and Gilbert Fernande was not the man to miss so excellent an opportunity of striking a little deeper than usual in his conversation with this proud beauty whom he had watched admiringly all the evening.

Constance was far too accomplished an actress to show her annoyance at this; in the society of people whom she disliked she was always reserved, only her reticence took the form, not of silence, but of the assumption of a character unlike her own.

She had an additional reason for doing so that night. She had mistrusted this man before she had heard his voice, and she was determined to find out—if it were possible—whether her first impressions had been true or false.

So she talked heartlessly, with the light scorn which is so easy and so much admired, which plays with earnestness of purpose, which jests at the struggles of those who hold life to be not a comedy but a battle.

Her careless words, and the gay mockery of her musical laughter would have pained Edward Claridas deeply, but they completely fascinated Gilbert Fernande. He thought meanly of women, as men who are essentially base always do; but a deep passion, in its grosser forms, is possible even to men whose ruling thought is self. He had admired the strange beauty of this girl with dark eyes and golden hair, and now he was attracted in a new way by her conversation. The simple faith of a pure woman, the maidenly

tenderness of a true heart, he believed in no more than he believed in God, or that grand manifestation of God; a soul indifferent to sordid temptations; but this delicate scepticism mirrored his own convictions, and coming from such beautiful lips, seemed to make them just and right.

Her words led him into an unwonted candour; he avowed many principles, which were potent influences in his life, though his habit was to keep them carefully concealed. It was imprudent, he admitted to himself, but not likely to offend this beautiful cynic; for he never doubted the sincerity of her polished epigrams. When we hear the assertion of what we hold to be firmly established truths, we are not apt to think the preacher is laughing at us all the while.

So Constance accomplished her purpose; she fathomed his heart, and realised the poverty of his soul; while he determined that at any cost or sacrifice he would win her for his wife.



CHAPTER XI.

UNSULLIED ONCE.

In the old Arabian stories, the favourite freak of the enchanter was the transformation of human beings into creatures with wild and fantastic shapes; in the streets of London such enchantment may be witnessed every day.

They pass by us almost unheeded, these creatures that have once been men and women, their faces darkly eloquent with suggestions of crime: brutal, sin-stained and miserable, coming no man knows whence, journeying to the gallows, the convict gang, or the muddy river; the foul slums of London shelter them—and well-dressed respectability says "Let them be forgotten."

But such beings rarely reach the country, the clear beauty of a cloudless sky, the unshadowed gladness of a laughing stream, the melody of birds floating high in air above the golden cornfields, the blended sweetness of a thousand wild flowers—what have they to do with scenes like this? Perhaps they may yet wander among them in dreams, if dreams are possible in such dark lives; but moral and physical evil are too closely akin for those who have fathomed the deepest degradation possible to men, and found how near hell it is possible to be on earth to breathe freely the air of purity and rest.

Yet in the hot July sunshine, through the dusty quiet of a Kentish lane, by the green hedgerows, sweet with the breath of flowers, a figure of this description was seen with a vague dread by the children playing in the fields of new mown hay.

She was still young, probably not more than two or three and twenty; but the premature age of guilt obliterates all youthful

grace, and unlike the light touch of pitying Time can give nothing in its stead.

Her face was so brutally coarse and sullen, that few men, however kind-hearted, would have given her the compassion which is the ungrudged heritage of misery. Nowhere does the benignant light of the Divine tenderness shine so brightly as upon the falling tears and trailing tresses of broken-hearted penitence; but who dare call a thing bespattered with the guilt of drunken years, and the daily perpetration of shameless evil —a woman?

Her dress was muddy and torn, her shoes were worn through, so that her feet were cut by the stones on which they sometimes trod; and blistered by the sun. She walked wearily, and there was a look of wild hunger in her haggard face, but she never hesitated, and walked onwards, looking neither to the right nor to the left, with the steadfastness of one who has a distinct purpose in view.

She did not seem to notice that the few

people, whom she passed, shrank from her as though there had been contamination in her touch. Guilt and grief have each an isolation of their own, crime can hear nothing but the voice of murdered innocence calling loudly for revenge, while sorrow sees only through blinding tears the white flowers growing on a new made grave. Janet Clerkwray had known dark depths both of sin and suffering, and she had learnt to care little for the world that scorned her.

Once a little girl, a mere baby of three years old, ran up to her, holding out a handful of newly gathered daisies for her to admire. Her face did not soften even at this, but she did not repulse the child, and was even listening with a kind of wondering incredulity to the baby's prattle, when the child's mother, a girl whose fair face was flushed with fear and indignation, caught the little one in her arms and hurried silently away. Janet Clerkwray cursed them both, with a laugh more horrible in its bitter reck-

lessness than any words, and continued doggedly her persistent way.

If a spirit from the world that lies beyond the grave stood in the midst of men, he could scarcely feel more hopelessly cut off from human fellowship than this desolate woman, who viewed life across a dark gulf of remembered shame, who only knew that she was living, from her unsatisfied hunger and her ceaseless sense of pain.

There was no message for her in tree or flower, in bird or stream; no note of sympathy in laughter or in song, in the sunburnt faces of the honest, ignorant men and women whom she passed; in children, whose untried innocence had never known a struggle. She had nothing in common with the world, and if she had felt certain that one plunge into the dark water would end all, she would not have hesitated long on the river's brink. But she had vague terrors of Death—the only relic left her of her childish faith in

God. So she did not cast her life away, but held it still, believing it to be a curse.

So, throughout the hot July afternoon she trod the dusty high road. At last she turned aside, and, climbing over a rustic stile, walked with the certainty of one who has often passed that way before, through three fields leading to a small thatched farm house.

"If the old man should be dead," she muttered, "I shall have had this cursed tramp from London for nothing."

She listened, but nothing was to be heard save the monotonous ticking of a clock. She hesitated a moment, then raised the latch and looked in.

The room was small and meanly furnished, but very clean. Everything that had been there five years before was there now, in unaltered aspect and position. In an easy chair an old man, erect and tall, with bright, keen eyes, a stern, unyielding mouth, and long grey hair, was sitting smoking.

The sound of the latch falling roused him

from his moody reflections, and after one glimpse at the visitor's face, his pipe fell from his trembling hand upon the ground, where it was shivered into a hundred fragments.

He started from his chair with an involuntary cry of horror, as though a dreadful apparition had suddenly appeared before him.

"Who—what are you?" he stammered faintly.

And she answered, without flinching—

"I am a devil now; but five years ago I was a woman, and then my name was Janet Clerkwray."

The old man sank again into his chair and buried his face in his hands. No sound escaped his lips, but his attitude was one of helpless misery.

At last he rose and confronted her—

"Why do you return to the home you have shamed? There is no penitence in your face."

"I am glad of that; for it would be a lie."

"Then why do you come here?"

"Because I am hungry, and want gold."

"I have none to give you; five years ago I told you that. Do you know me no better than to fancy you can change my resolution by a word?"

She laughed bitterly.

"Do you think I have forgotten?" she said. "No; I know your dogged spirit too well for that. You will not give me gold, you say; it is not enough that I am starving; good, I ask you to *give* nothing; but what you will not give you will *sell*."

"Sell—for what?"

"I will tell you directly; but first give me food and drink. I told you I was hungry."

Paul Clerkwray looked wonderingly at her face, and, seeing that she was in earnest, hesitated no longer. Opening a cupboard, he took out some cold meat, a loaf of bread, and a jug of beer—his own supper—which he placed before her.

She ate and drank ravenously, with the eagerness of a famished wild beast rather than a woman's hunger.

Her father watched her all the while, as though her face had a diabolical fascination for him. Yes, in this wretched creature he could still find some trace of the daughter he had loved—a terrible discovery, like the wailing parodies of heaven's anthems, chanted by fallen angels in their unillumined night.

At last he said, with a strange blending of wonder, remembrance, and aversion, all the while watching her intently—

"Is life so sweet to you still, then?"

And she answered him in the harsh, reckless tones of one who has abandoned hope for ever—

"Yes; if it is sweet to be hungry and ragged; to have everyone shrink from you as though you were plague-stricken; to know that you are lower than the unclaimed dogs in the street—life is worse than that to me—you can guess if it is sweet or not."

"And yet you ask for gold, and eat as though you cared to live."

His daughter did not immediately answer

the last remark. She continued eating and drinking till he thought she had forgotten it; but at last she said—

"You wonder why I have not flung myself in the river, like so many do. I would if I dared. There was a girl slept with me once whose story was like mine. She told me she would do so; and next night—"

"She had done it?"

"I saw her when the tide washed her body ashore, and I touched her wet hair and her white face, and her stiffened limbs, and I envied her. But next night, when I crept down to the waterside, I could not take the one plunge that would have settled all."

Paul Clerkwray shuddered. He could remember the time when his little daughter Janet had knelt beside him, lisping baby petitions to God.

"Have you fallen so low as that?" he said.

And she answered, without a moment's hesitation—

"Lower a thousand times. I have been in

prison often; if I had my due I should be there now."

She finished her meal as she spoke.

"Enough of this," she said impatiently. "I believed in God till my baby died; but since then—no matter what. I have come here for money."

"How much?"

"Ten pounds."

"I am poor, and cannot afford to give so much."

"To give—no. I should not have tramped all the way from London to ask that. I am your daughter; but that did not prevent you from driving me out of your home."

"When you had brought shame upon it."

"No matter for that. Have you forgotten what you told me then?"

"That I would never see you again; that I renounced you for ever; that I would never speak to you again, unless—"

"Unless—"

"Unless you gave me the name of the man

who had thrown this reproach upon my home, and you said you would be torn to pieces first."

She answered with an oath that would have been horrible uttered by a man, but which, coming from a woman's lips, and that woman his own daughter, inspired her hearer with a vague sense of dread.

"Ay, for I knew you too well to doubt whether your vengeance would be pitiless or not—and I loved him. But I had not lived five years in London then; I had not known what it was to be hungry and miserable and shunned; I had not seen him rich, and heard his light words of scorn when I asked him for a shilling to buy bread. Curse him; I would have him wretched, too."

"You will give me his name, then?"

"Yes; if you will pay me for it."

With hands that trembled, but not from indecision, the old man unlocked a writing desk, and took from it two bank notes.

Janet Clerkwray had not mistaken the man to whom she appealed. Love for his daughter

had died long ago; but there still smouldered in his mind a fierce hatred for the man who had ruined her; a hungry craving for vengeance upon him who had desolated his home for ever.

"Ten pounds you said?"

"Yes."

"Tell me his name and you shall have the money."

She handed him a slip of paper, on which a name and address was scrawled. He read it carefully, and muttered an inaudible word of menace. Then he said—

"This name may be false, but I will trust you. There is the money. Go."

"Have you no gold? No one will believe that a bank-note could come into my possession unless I stole it."

He replaced the notes and gave her their equivalent in gold. She counted the ten sovereigns with the slow caution of one to whom mistrust has become habitual, and then left him without even a parting word of thanks or farewell.

He sat motionless for some minutes, dreading that she would return again to make some further claim, which he could not refuse perhaps, at any rate to add to his burning sense of humiliation; but at length he rose and unlocked his desk again.

He did not take money from it this time, but a drawing he had kept there many years. It had not much artistic merit—it was the work of a mere boy; but it had been sacred to him until this hour, and now he shuddered as he looked, for it had in it the terrible power of satanic mockery.

It was the face of a little girl, with large wondering eyes, rosy cheeks, pouting lips, and curling hair. A pretty child—nothing more; but fair with the light of childish purity and innocence. This had been his daughter once, and now—

Human love rarely outlives the wreck of all that is worthy of it. Such love exists sometimes in women—now and then it is found in men, but the angels, seeking for the Godlike on earth, but rarely witness it.

Paul Clerkwray had no tenderness for the wretched creature with whom he had spoken half an hour before—what was there in her that could inspire anything but loathing and horror?

But though men often remember the past only as a thing that is dead, they do remember it. And the love of long ago, which was not strong enough to stir within him one impulse of sympathy towards his fallen daughter, had power enough to awaken in his mind a wild craving for vengeance on the man who had brought shame and desolation upon her and him.

It was too late to dream of reclaiming her; if a river's tide had washed her, stiffened in death, to his feet, he would have felt no sorrow, for if any hope had lingered in his breast, that evening would have crushed it out for ever. But it was not too late for revenge—that was possible as destruction always is.

He had heard the name written on the paper before. It was the name of a rich man, and he knew how unequal the struggle always

is between poverty and wealth. But he was armed with the strength of hate, and had no doubt what would be the end of the battle. He was right—material forces are weak indeed in the battle with spiritual, and hate is stronger than anything else in the universe—except love.

"I will hunt him down like a bloodhound," muttered Paul Clerkwray to himself. "And I shall not fail, for I have learned to wait, and he must have wronged other men who will help me to crush him."

So two days later he came to London. The great city had already received Janet Clerkwray into the secrecy of its hiding places—to add some new chapter probably to the dark story of her guilt.

Was there no redeeming virtue in this woman's breast? Had she indeed become an incarnate fiend, as she had almost boastingly called herself? Men would have said so, but angels read more deeply, and only God knoweth all.



CHAPTER XII.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

"EDWARD," said his sister on his return home one night, "how late you are."

"I am rather later than usual," he said, lightly. He had never thought it necessary to tell her that to increase their slender income, he had undertaken the preparation of two students for examination at the University.

"Rather later," repeated Emily, "it is nearly eleven o'clock."

"And yet I find you alone in the darkness. I thought you were too practical a young lady to sit idly dreaming."

"I have not been alone all the time," said Emily.

"Has Guy been here then?"

"Yes, part of the time."

"I shall send that indolent young artist a tract on the dignity of labour. If he continues to neglect his art as much as he has done lately, his pictures, if he paints any, will do better for signboards than for the Royal Academy."

"He is a very great artist," said Emily, indignantly, "and all the best critics are beginning to admit it—and, as for work, he is going to be desperately industrious this winter."

"Is he? Then I will give the tract to you instead."

Emily was silent for a little while, then she said softly—

"I want to tell you a great secret, Edward; something that will surprise you very much."

"I belong to a stolid profession, Emily, that is never surprised at anything. Shall I try to guess?"

"You will never guess."

"Is it of national interest, or merely personal?"

"Quite personal."

"That narrows the matter considerably. Let me see—has the milkman, in love with Eliza, turned out to be a disguised nobleman, and dazzled her young soul with the prospect of becoming a countess?"

"No," said Emily, laughing, "though I think she would be hardly surprised if he did. She told me he reminded her of the hero in the penny novel she has been reading lately, and he was a strolling actor who turned out to be an emperor."

"A very agreeable transformation. What is the name of the work in question?"

"'Mangled and Torn.' Have you read it?"

"No, but the title is seductive; it is so essentially cheerful, though I should have thought 'Mangled and Ironed' would have been better; perhaps it is a subtle satire, though, on the condition in which shirts

usually return from the washing. But this has nothing to do with your secret. Are you thinking of delivering a course of public lectures, on the rights of your injured sex to sit in Parliament?"

"Don't be silly—guess again."

"My ingenuity of conjecture is quite exhausted, and I can think of nothing unless you have heard that I am to be made a judge."

"Well, then I will tell you," she said, coming to his side, and putting her hand with a light caressing touch upon his shoulder. "Dear Edward, I want you to love Guy very much, because—because he loves me."

"There is no great merit in that, Emily; or if there is, I have been unconsciously heroic all my life; but that is only half the secret."

"The other half is that I love him better than anything else in the world—better even than I love you, though I used to think nobody could ever make me do that."

"It's a wonderful secret, Emmy, and both you and Guy have hidden it with consummate skill worthy of gray-headed diplomatists."

"You don't mean to say you had the faintest suspicion of it?"

"It showed almost superhuman penetration on my part doubtless; but when you and Guy could scarcely talk of anything else but one another; when you and he sat teasing each other night after night; when Guy spoilt a really fine picture by introducing you into it—"

"That is uncomplimentary."

"No it isn't, Emmy, you know what I think of your face, but you can't deny that in Guy's painting, Queen Vashti looked very much like Dolly Varden."

Emily laughed, and Edward continued—

"When you take just three times as long as usual to dress if Guy is coming, and I find you one night actually crying with delight over a favourable review of his last

painting, it is possible even for an uninspired intellect to arrive at a correct conclusion. But there, I won't tease you any more, I am very, very glad of this, dear Emily. Guy is really a fine fellow, and though it will be hard to part with my little housekeeper, I should be base indeed if there were any hesitation in my congratulation at such a time as this."

He kissed her as he spoke, and they sat together for some time without saying a word. Their companionship had been very unlike the ordinary relations of brother and sister, in which a languid affection is frequently paid "of necessity" like a tax, and called love. They were utterly unlike each other, for Emily, affectionate and gentle as she was, had far too little greatness of nature even to understand her brother's character, or to sympathise with his high aims and ideals. But she had loved and admired him from her babyhood, and he had given her a depth of tenderness such as is only possible to a heart that is rich in earnest strength.

"Edward," said Emily, "I have not been all to you that a sister ought to have been, I know I've been horrid—trivial, I mean—and shallow and selfish."

"Nonsense, Emmy. If I begin confessing *my* sins to you, you won't go to bed. I ought —When are you to be married, dear?"

"Guy would like the wedding to be very soon."

"How soon?"

"Early in September."

"And this is July; he is impatient to-night to enact the part of a stern parent, and put obstacles in the way, to test your constancy. What are your plans?"

"Guy wants to spend another year in art study at Rome, and when we come back, of course you must live with us, until you find your ideal of maidenhood and marry, too."

Edward evaded the point by saying lightly—

"It seems droll to think of such a child as you being married."

"Child!" repeated Emily, in mock indignation. "Do you know, sir, that I am twenty-two? And Gerty's friend, Ida Lascelles, who married Mr. Harbourne last week, was four years younger."

"By the way you have not told me about your visit to Richmond this morning. How is Gerty?"

The laughter died away from Emily's face, and the tears started to her eyes, as she said sorrowfully—

"She is very ill, Edward, very ill indeed. Our worst fears will be fulfilled. They are breaking her heart."

"Did you see Colonel Renetta?"

"Yes, and he was frigidly polite as usual. I think he was glad that I had come though, when he saw how Gerty brightened. They are really fond of her, Edward, though they have such a strange way of showing it."

"Yes, I believe that. When I was over there last, Miss Renetta told me she thought all poetry was idle folly, but nothing could

have been gentler than the quiet care she took of Gerty. These practical people are not wise enough to crush feeling after all, but they are unpleasantly successful in muffling and concealing it. Poor Gerty! she was never strong, and now I am afraid she is actually consumptive. Why don't they take her to Italy, or the south of France, or even to Ventnor? The winds are too bleak for her here, even in July."

"Her father wanted her to go very much, but she has some strong reason for wishing to remain in England. I don't know what it is, but his wishes and hers seem always clashing. I heard a strange piece of news to-day from Miss Renetta."

"What is it?"

"You know Gilbert Fernande visits there?"

"Yes."

"He asked her to be his wife, and she refused. Colonel Renetta and his sister were very disappointed. They would have liked our amiable cousin for a relation very much."

Edward looked surprised.

"I should have thought Gerty the last girl living Gilbert would have fallen in love with," said he.

Emily looked at him wonderingly. On this point her sight had always been clearer than his.

"I never said anything about love," she said. "Gilbert was not the man to forget Gerty was an heiress."

Edward looked pained.

"You wrong him, Emmy. Marriage for money is base enough at all times. But such a marriage with an innocent defenceless girl, like Gerty, would be the very lowest depth of dastardly meanness. Gilbert is far too honourable to stoop to such an action."

Emily did not pursue the subject. In all ordinary affairs Edward's warm imagination was not stronger than his keen discrimination, but he seemed incapable of understanding the persistent treachery of a false heart.

"Where will you live, Edward, when I am

gone? Of course when we come back again you'll live with us."

"I can easily find a room somewhere; my possessions are not so numerous as to make selection difficult."

"You will not live with Mr. Vivian, then, and subdue the hitherto obstinate heart of Mrs. Rubblebake."

"No."

"Why not? Are you afraid of falling in love with that beautiful golden-haired niece of his, with the wonderful dark eyes?"

Edward parried the question and turned the conversation to other themes. He would have shared rooms with Lionel, if he had not known that the effect of such a course would be to put an end to Constance Vivian's visits there, and he had no right to demand of Lionel such a sacrifice as that.

Perhaps also he may not have been wholly free from interested motives. Although he had only seen her once, the thought of Constance had haunted him like a rhythmic

sequence of sweet sounds. Why should he not see her again? She was strangely and perfectly beautiful, and beauty is a necessity of the poet's nature. There is a rapture for him in all loveliness, from the delicate fibres of mountain moss to the luminous glory of a star. And beauty finds its supreme and dominant form in the perfection of a woman's face.

It was not strange that any man, having seen Constance once, should make strenuous efforts to see her again, especially if he had caught some glimpses of the truth and steadfastness of her nature; but this was not love, and Edward had no fear of its ever becoming so.

It would have been madness for him—a poor poet who had never made a penny by his writings—a barrister who had about five or six briefs throughout the term, gaining his bread by the routine of a copying clerk's ill-paid duties—to think of winning the heart of a proud beauty, who had been accustomed to

the enjoyment of every luxury her capricious fancy might desire, from her infancy ; and if this were not barrier enough, there was the strong conviction in his mind, that he held life with a light and uncertain hand, that in a little while it would fall from him for ever.

Edward had thought deeply on the despotic tyranny of feeling; but he had no fear for himself. His life had been a continual struggle against adverse circumstances. So many influences had combined to dwarf his manhood, to starve his imagination, to crush his buoyancy of spirit, and he had conquered them all with the steadfast resistance a rock offers to the mad fury of the foaming waves. Was a fair face to do what nothing else could accomplish ? He smiled at the idea.

So he did not discontinue his frequent visits to Lionel, and during the next two months he often saw Constance there. Had he acted wisely in this, he would have foreseen the inevitable course of her feelings, even though he had had no fear for his own.

But he did not seriously contemplate the possibility of her loving him, for a moment—who was he to inspire a great worship in the breast of such a girl as this? So through the months of July and August they often met at Lionel's rooms, and Constance, after a few ineffectual struggles, yielded to the fascination of the moment, and suffered herself to drift with the stream, vexing her heart with questioning no more.

It was not strange that it should be so. Home had been always dreary, and now it was doubly so, for her mother had discovered that her lungs were affected as well as her liver, and her father was continually wearying her with his praises of Gilbert Fernande, and his observations touching the extent of the young merchant's wealth and resources.

For Gilbert had not abandoned his determination to win Constance for his wife. Her beauty had stirred his cold blood to a passion which he called love, and which was as near

love as such a man was capable of feeling. He had little doubt of his success, for he was armed with two great forces—wealth and patience.

He soon found out that she disliked him, but he was not the man to be daunted by such a discovery as this. His cool self-confidence never failed, till he formed the shrewd conclusion from several circumstances—trivial in themselves, but not so when taken together—that she loved his cousin.

"Confound the fellow," muttered Gilbert to himself as he had so often done before. "Here he baffles me again. He robbed me of a wife's dowry; he shall not cheat me of this girl's beauty. Whether she loves him or not, he shall never marry her unless he has won her promise already; a few words will separate them."

So one morning early in September the post brought Constance a letter in a hand-writing she did not know, which ran thus:—

"Constance Vivian—It is right you should be told that Edward Claridas is false and base. His pretended generosity to Gertrude Renetta was an act of thinly-veiled corruption, and he boasts openly of your love for him, and his frequent interviews with you at your uncle's house."

Constance crushed the letter up angrily—her face crimson with indignation. She knew the accusation to be a lying calumny, for to a great love, mistrust is impossible, and she had ceased to ask her heart whether the ideals of poets were impossible of attainment or not.

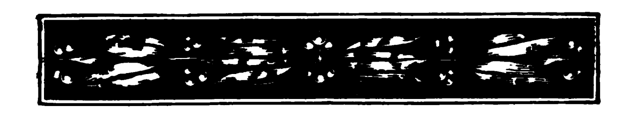
She loved Edward Claridas with a deeper worship than ever she had pictured herself capable of giving in the wildest of her girlish dreams. She would have believed in his truth and honour though the whole world had denied it, and the crushing force of overwhelming evidence had pointed to an opposite conclusion; it was not likely, therefore, that she would abandon her faith

in him on the bare assertion of anonymous invective.

Constance tore the letter again and again, then threw it from her in disgust; so certain was she that the accusation was a lie that she did not even trouble herself to inquire who had written it.

But her womanly pride was wounded, and the letter was so far successful that it accomplished its primary object. Mrs. Rubblebake might charge Lionel half a guinea a week for his "notion" of receiving visitors if she liked, but Edward and Constance were never to meet at that house again.





CHAPTER XIII.

LIGHT.

EDWARD'S secret had never seemed farther from discovery, than on the day his sister was married. All the latent buoyancy of his disposition asserted itself, and although that day was the first of an indefinite separation, his wit sparkled more brilliantly, his mirth seemed more natural, his laughter had the most ringing gaiety of all the assembled guests.

But that night when he was alone—when Guy and his bride were far away—he felt the sense of weariness which is the inevitable reaction against unnatural effort.

The despondent mood came to him like this, sometimes—as it comes to all men who strive to work out a great purpose, in a world

which is too sad and foolish to be great, and therefore finds a passing solace in faint jesting at those who will not accept the materialism of its petty creeds—but he fought and conquered in all such battles silently and alone.

And now when the tide of life flowed with so pitiless a current against him—when physical pain, change, loneliness, and the thwarting of a great passion, which had risen in his heart, combined to force him into inaction, he defeated them all by the simple expedient of work.

By work of the hand not of the brain. He never attempted composition unless every intellectual faculty was bright and clear. This was one of the reasons why his poetry never had a mechanical tone in it, but was free and fearless as the song of a forest bird, or the laughter of a stream that ripples down the mountain side.

He had some law-papers to copy, and he worked at them steadily for hours. As the

clock struck ten he heard an impatient knock at the door, followed by the sound of Eliza Yellowink stumbling upstairs, which was her invariable custom before admitting a visitor.

Not at all disconcerted, the plump maiden in question occasioned some confusion by a similar catastrophe in preceding the guest, as though falling up and falling down were sparkling epigrams which would well bear repetition.

This did not seem a natural prelude to serious conversation, but if Edward had felt any tendency to laugh, one glance at his visitor's face would have effectually dispelled it.

It was Edgar Lascelles. He threw his card upon the table without a word, and Edward at once inferred from his evident agitation, and the weariness of his manner (showing with what hot haste he had come) that he bore the tidings of some great sorrow.

"Is Gerty ill?" said Edward, divining the truth by a quick instinct, and not pausing to utter the preliminary phrases of ordinary courtesy.

"She is dying," said Edgar, wildly.

"Dying?"

"She has been ill some time; two days ago she broke a blood vessel, and now she is sinking fast."

He spoke recklessly, wildly, the greatness of his own sorrow admitting no thought of compassionate sympathy with the grief of others.

The words pierced Edward like barbed arrows. His own sister was not dearer to him than Gertrude, and Edgar had not prepared him for this by a single word.

"Will you come to Richmond with me?" he said, not pausing for any comment on the tidings he brought. "I have come here at the risk of losing the last word she will speak on earth. I have come because she would have wished it; for she loves you though you care nothing for her."

While he was speaking Edward had locked his papers away; now he touched the younger man's arm gently, and said—

"In moments of great grief any words are pardonable. Perhaps my sorrow is not so deep as yours; but it is not the petty thing you seem to think. Enough of this. I am ready to start now; but the last train will have gone."

"I have a carriage waiting at the door. Waste no more time, for God's sake; we may be too late."

Throughout the long drive the two men scarcely exchanged a word, though it seemed interminable to both of them. Most of us have known such journeys, when the lagging moments have brought with them no thought of comfort; when the repeated delays have maddened us into uncertainty, whether we may not be too late for the parting word we would fain treasure as a sacred remembrance, until to us also the world is lost for ever.

When they at last arrived at Colonel

Renetta's, Edgar gave a sigh of relief to see lights still burning. Surely if the worst he dreaded had happened, all would be darkness.

"Miss Gertrude is still living, sir," said the servant who opened the door, reading the inquiry in his face before he could put it into words; "but the doctors say she is sinking fast."

They passed through the brilliantly-lighted rooms. On every side was the evidence of wealth and refinement. There seemed a silent mockery in the glitter and beauty of everything. Of what use was her father's fortune? It had never given her a moment's gladness, like an echo to the laughter of the haymakers in the field, who were content with their coarse and scanty fare; and now, while thousands of poor men's daughters were exulting in the sense of rustic health, the vaunted strength of gold was impotent to save her from the touch of death.

In one of the smaller rooms Gertrude was lying upon the sofa in a plain summer dress

of pure white, which threw into striking contrast the beauty of her long black hair.

Colonel Renetta and his sister were standing by her side, watching the face of the dying girl with a grief not unshadowed by self-reproach. They loved her; if there had been any doubts in their minds, this moment of dread anticipation would have dispelled them; but had they given her the tenderness which she needed? True, they had meant to do so; but of what avail was that if they had failed?

The sadness of watching a human life ebb away becomes terror when we know that the pale lips might justly utter the language of reproach.

Gertrude was unconscious, not with the wild fantasies of delirium, which create a dream-world of their own, but with the incoherence of waning energy, which so often precedes death, losing the distinction between past and present, and confusing realities together.

She talked, not as was her custom, with slow hesitation, but with the rapid utterance of one on whose mind many thoughts are breaking in quick succession, like waves upon a rocky shore.

As Edward entered the room he saw by her words that she fancied herself in the old home again, and was pleading with him not to let her leave it.

"I have been so happy here," they heard her say; "must all this end? I know he is my father; but he has not known me from a child. He is good; yes, I know it; but he does not love me, and he is always cold. If I had been like the girls I met at his house, who laugh as though their lives were a sunny, indolent dream, he would have been proud of me; but how can he love me as I am? I can do nothing to please him, though I have tried so hard; but it is no use; he does not even care to hear me play and sing."

She was silent for a few moments; then she continued—

"But here it is so different. I have not to hear strange voices that have no inflection of tenderness in them; and when I talk to you about the strange thoughts music seems to whisper to me, you do not call it folly. . . . But in his great house those fancies never come to me; only the sense of being desolate and tired."

When she spoke again she evidently fancied herself in the garden summer-house near the river, with Edgar Lascelles.

"Poor boy, and you say you love me. I believe it, for you are different to anyone else. But it is strange you should love me, for no one else does. . . . . . And yet *he* kissed me once. Was it years ago? It seems so."

She paused, evidently trying to collect her scattered thoughts about time; but the attempt was vain, and she soon continued in the same strain—

"No, he never loved me as you do; but he was gentle and tender, and he kissed me once. Was not that worth all the pain love

brought? For it was an honour even to hear his voice; he was great like the heroes he told me legends about; and the old poets, whose wise words great men and fair women quote."

Again she was silent, as though waiting for a reply; then she said—

"Do I pain you, Edgar? Forgive me; I did not mean to do that. You will forget me by-and-by, for I know I shall die soon, and there are few men who are always loyal to the past when all is changed in the present."

She uttered a few more words, whose meaning they could not distinguish, and then, wearied with the exertion she had made, she fell asleep.

When she woke again her mind seemed to have recovered its clearness, and she said, quite distinctly—

"Father."

He came to her side directly.

"What is it, darling?"

"I have been dreaming, I think, and I

fancied you did not love me. But that was not true, was it?"

"God knows I love you, darling."

"Yes; it was foolish to think otherwise; but we have not understood each other always—it was my fault; but it is over now, and there will be no shadow between us in heaven."

"There will never be any shadow between us again on earth," he said huskily; "for you must make me happy for many years yet, darling. We will go to some warmer country than this, and you will soon be well again."

She shook her head, but did not reply to this in words.

"I have been dreaming of my mother, too," she said. "She was very beautiful, was she not?"

"Yes, Gerty, and you are like her."

"Did you love her?"

Colonel Renetta tried to answer, but could not control his voice. Gertrude did not

repeat her question, but lay quite motionless until Edward crossed the room to open the door for Miss Renetta, when her quick ear caught the sound of his footstep and recognised it.

She almost unconsciously uttered his name, and Colonel Renetta at once yielded him the place by her side.

"I thought I was dreaming still," she said, softly, when he had raised her hand to his lips and called her gently by her name. "But God is good, and He has sent you here. Is Emily married?"

"Yes."

"And happy, I know."

"Very happy."

"And your epic—is that nearly finished?"

"It will take several months yet."

He would rather not have spoken of himself or his work at such a time, but did not attempt to evade her direct question.

"It will be great," she said, proudly. "I wonder if any note of your triumph will reach me."

"I have lost one great source of inspiration, Gerty," he said.

"What is that?"

"Your music."

She smiled and brightened as he spoke. No triumph earth could give would have been so sweet to her as his praise.

"You always thought too much of it. You *do* miss me then a little sometimes?"

"Very, very much."

"It makes me so happy to know it. Your gentleness was not all pity, then?"

"Dear Gerty, I have never dared to pity you. One does not pity a woman who has beauty and genius."

"Am I beautiful?"

"You are very beautiful."

No woman can hear that assurance unmoved from the lips of the man she loves. It thrilled Gertrude like music, though the life within her was growing faint and weak.

"You honour me by your praise, and you have given me so many things; yet I will ask for one thing more."

"It is yours, Gerty, if it is mine."

"It is a word of confidence. Is there no woman whom you love with a great worship, like you have written about in your books?"

He hesitated, for it was a secret he had never revealed to any one—which he had scarcely admitted even to himself; but he had promised, and in a few moments she heard his whispered answer—

"Yes."

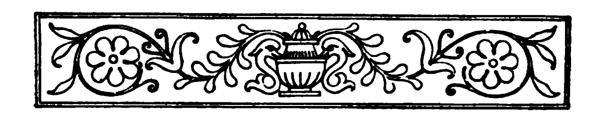
"She must be very beautiful if she is worthy of you. Will you tell me her name?"

"Constance."

Gertrude repeated the name two or three times in a low voice to herself; then she whispered, faintly—

"God bless you . . . . . and *her*."

Then there was a long silence in the quiet room—a stillness which no one dared to break. The night without was chill and starless; but the morning of an eternal day had dawned for Gertrude, and the clouds of darkness had rolled away from her for ever.



CHAPTER XIV.

VICTORY OR DEFEAT?

THE secret which Edward Claridas had whispered to Gertrude Renetta was suspected by no one else. Constance, deeply as she loved him, had never divined the fact—quick as women usually are to discover when they are loved—for his manner to her had never exceeded courtesy. He, who had conquered so much, failed here, for her beauty and the harmony of her nature with his own had swept away his resistance as iron pillars are thrown down by the fury of a storm-lashed sea.

But even in failure he could not be ignoble. The transition of feeling from one shade to another is always rapid, and frequently imperceptible; and never is this more strikingly evident than in a man's thoughts of a beautiful

woman. Edward had been scarcely conscious how far admiration and regard had deepened into love till Gertrude had challenged his candour by her inquiry.

Yes, he loved her—and in his nature no impulse or affection could be other than great. The interest of life's supreme emotion lies in nothing so much as its universality; but perhaps it never attains to its ideal perfection, except in the heart of a poet, who finds a woman sweet enough to be a Muse.

Edward's determination to see Constance as little as possible, which he now formed, great as the struggle was, was quite unnecessary, for after the receipt of the anonymous letter she avoided him. So the months of September and October passed away, without their once meeting.

One night, early in November, Edward found, on returning home, a man walking up and down the street outside his house, evidently waiting for him, for he advanced to meet him, and said, enquiringly—

"I think you are Mr. Claridas, sir?"

"That is my name, but I have never seen you before. I remember faces very well, and yours is not one to be easily forgotten."

The remark was just, for although the stranger's dress was only that of a respectable farmer, there was a steadfastness of purpose expressed in his keen eyes and firm mouth that were not unworthy of a great soldier. He was an old man, with long grey hair, but looked hardy and strong, and seemed quite indifferent to the bleak wind and driving rain.

"My name is Paul Clerkwray. You do not know it, but that does not signify. Can I have a few minutes' conversation with you alone, sir?"

"Come in."

Since Emily's marriage, Edward had taken a single room in Westminster, to be near the law courts. Here he brought Paul Clerkwray, and having lit the gas and handed him a chair, waited for the man's communication.

The stranger was shrewdly observant of

the room, its only attraction being the many rare and valuable books upon the shelves, which at once betrayed the scholar.

"You are not rich," he said.

"No."

"And yet you are a gentleman and a scholar. We poor men rarely see a library like that. And I suppose you have other expensive tastes, which you cannot afford to gratify—statues and paintings, for instance?"

"Yes," said Edward, quite at a loss to understand whither these remarks would lead him.

"You wonder why I ask you these things. I will tell you. I have found a will in your favour, bequeathing a large fortune to you. If you choose, you can become a rich man in a week. I ask no payment for this discovery—I want none. I simply ask you to claim your right."

Edward looked at the speaker with astonishment. His story seemed wild and improbable; but if he were a common impostor, why did he refuse money?

"Will you be a little more explicit? It will be easier to answer you then."

"You do not believe me; but you will do so in a moment, when you have heard my story. I will tell you frankly why I am here. I am a Kentish farmer—a little better educated than most men of my class, perhaps; but I was quite content with my farm, my work, and my daughter."

He paused a moment as if checking himself in an impulse of confidence, and then continued—

"Some years ago a man wronged me. No matter how—it was a bitter wrong, which even blood could not efface."

Edward had no doubt of the man's sincerity now. There are depths of quiet anger which no acting can portray.

"I was wronged I say years ago, but I did not know by whom till last July. When I heard it I came to London, and since then my steady purpose has been revenge."

Edward did not interrupt him by a word

—to have told him such a horrible life purpose was barbarous and wrong, would have been throwing words away.

"I have not laboured in vain. For a poor man to hunt a rich man down is hard, but I have done it; I have dogged his footsteps; I have bribed his servants; I have learnt the story of his life."

He paused again with the hesitation of a man unaccustomed to fluent speech, who knows exactly the things he wishes to say, but is uncertain in what order to say them; his indecision was only momentary, however, and he soon continued—

"He has wronged many, and been a traitor always, but he has never been guilty of what the law calls crime. It would have been my greatest triumph if I could have brought public disgrace upon him. He is too clever for that, but I can rob him legally of what he values most—of money."

"How can you?"

"In the course of my inquiries I found

out that a confidential servant of his, named Rivers, had been dismissed from his service, and was now ill and poor."

Edward started, for the name was familiar to him, but did not interrupt his visitor, who continued with no further pause—

"I traced the man, and found him at last—dying in extreme poverty. He was easily persuaded to tell me what I wanted to know. He had been a clerk in a lawyer's office, and had fallen into the power of the man I hate, by a boyish folly. This man acquired absolute control over him, and knowing he would be a convenient tool, took him into his service."

"What was the master's name?"

"I will tell you directly. Rivers was weak and easily subdued—he served his master's purpose for a while, and when his health failed, he was cast off as a worn out thing that had no further use. He had always known this would be the end of it, and he played the spy cunningly and well. If he

had not been a coward, afraid to strike a bold blow, he might have brought his tyrant to his feet."

"I thought you said his master had committed no crime?"

"He had not, but he had done many things he would have been ashamed should see the light. I told you Rivers had been in the law—he was in the office of Messrs. Effledene and Co. You know the name I think?"

"They were my father's solicitors."

"They were; and soon after you parted with your father, they drew up a will of his, leaving all his money to your cousin. You ask for the name of the man who has wronged me. It is Gilbert Fernande."

"You cannot rob *him* of his inheritance—the will was genuine by which he inherited his money."

"I know it, but there was another will of later date in your favour."

"You are mistaken; the last act of my

father's life proves that he had left me nothing."

"He thought so—but the mistake was his not mine. He made a will two years later than the first one, leaving all he possessed to you, but the first will was not destroyed."

"How could my father have forgotten such an act as that?"

"I did not say he had forgotten it. He wrote to Mr. Effledene saying he would call at the office, destroy the second will, and let the first one remain in force. Rivers saw the letter, and formed his resolution accordingly—he had fallen into Fernande's power, and here was an opportunity of escaping from it. He stole the real will and put a clever imitation in its place. The trick was successful—the forgery was destroyed, the real will remained in the hands of Rivers. He was not bold enough to use it, but he kept it, and when he was dying he gave it to me. That will has only to be proved, and Gilbert Fernande's fortune is yours."

"I cannot congratulate you on your discovery, Mr. Clerkwray," said Edward quietly; "you surely do not believe me capable of availing myself of a fraud?"

"Why not, when you know but for fraud the money would have been your own?"

"I do not know anything of the kind."

"It is because you won't then," said the other roughly. "I have not come here with half a case. Here are letters, which I will show you in a minute, from your father to your cousin, which show pretty clearly whether he was induced to destroy the will by lies or not."

"You are mistaken—Gilbert is my friend—he has repeatedly asserted his affection for me."

Paul Clerkwray laughed, with the impatient bitterness of one who is asked to believe that which a thousand experiences have abundantly proved to be false.

"You are a great man I have been told, Mr. Claridas, by those who understand and

care for writings like yours, but you speak of professions of attachment like a child. Is it possible that you have known your cousin all your life without finding out how vile he is? I tell you he is a traitor, whose natural speech is lying."

"I cannot believe it. Gilbert may have been guilty of grave faults; many men not bad at heart have been so, but that he could have lied and flattered, and secretly assailed as you describe—it is incredible."

"Do you think I should have come here without proofs?" said Paul Clerkwray contemptuously. "A traitor *must* lie; it is his life. That he hated you was almost my first discovery, and I hold the proofs of what he has done."

"What has he done?"

"He widened the gulf between your father and you, and when the old man wanted reconciliation he averted it by lies. Your books have been unfairly attacked by some journals—have they not?"

"Yes."

"Your cousin, in whose faith you are wise enough to believe, wrote the reviews. He would have married the girl you befriended for her gold. Now he aims higher, and would marry Constance Vivian."

"Constance Vivian!"

"Yes; and when he found the girl loved you, he wrote her an anonymous letter charging you with vile deeds. Do you believe in his treachery now?"

Edward felt stunned and bewildered as though the rapid words he heard had been blows. Could this be true? Paul Clerkwray spoke with a force which made doubt difficult, and he had made no assertion that could be at once disproved. But the mind, always tenacious in its clinging to an old belief, has never a firmer clasp than its adherence to the supposed loyalty of a friend.

"If what you say is false you have the malice of a devil; if it is true, give me proofs."

"There they are," said Paul Clerkwray, throwing some papers on the table. "The anonymous letter is a copy; ask the girl, to whom it was sent, if it is genuine. The rest are originals."

Edward took them up, and as he read, the slow certainty of Gilbert's baseness crept over his mind like a storm shadow. He recognised at once not only his father's handwriting, but his favourite tricks of phrase, which no stranger could have imitated. It seemed as though the old man had preferred writing to speaking on such a theme, and his letters showed more distinctly than the most skilful mental analysis could have done, the long struggle the writer evidently made with the doubts suggested to him. Paul Clerkwray had obtained possession of the proof-sheets of the articles on Edward's poems, and the corrections were unmistakably in the handwriting of Gilbert Fernande. Of the offer of marriage to Gertrude Renetta there was, of course, no written proof; but Edward re-

membered his sister's remarks about it; and faith in the man who had so loudly protested his attachment, was torn from him as a treasure is forced from the grasp of a strong swimmer by resistless waves.

"Do you doubt the truth of my words *now?*" said Paul Clerkwray, triumphantly.

"I would if I could, but I cannot; and yet he has been my friend, and we were boys together at school."

The older man saw it was time to strike his final blow.

"What is your decision?" he said. "The man who stole the will is dead; no one knows the story but you and I, and you need have no fear that I shall talk. The choice is with you; will you bury these ridiculous scruples, which other men would laugh at, and be rich, or will you let all this infamy go unpunished? Perhaps he will marry Constance Vivian, after all. The Devil is generous and gold is strong."

The bow was drawn at a venture, but the

arrow struck home. Edward was very pale, and his lips trembled. He was silent for some moments; then he said—

"All this has bewildered me, and I cannot think calmly what to say or do. Leave me alone for an hour; when you return you shall have my reply."

So Paul Clerkwray left him for a while, with little doubt that his purpose was virtually accomplished, and his longed-for victory won.

At first Edward could think of nothing but the fact, established beyond all possibility of doubt, that the man whom he had loved and trusted—who was bound to him by the strong ties of blood, and the stronger ties of boyish companionship—was a traitor, who had secretly hated him all the while.

Like all men whose thoughts about life or character are worth listening to at all, Edward Claridas possessed in a remarkable degree the power of comprehending, and sympathising with impulses widely unlike his own; but the

one thing he seemed unable to understand—which he was always slow to discover, and having once fully realised, was apt to be bitter with—was treachery.

It was no common wrong that he had suffered; forgiveness is natural to noble minds, and if the loss of fortune had been all, his sorrow, at the unworthiness of a trusted heart, would never have deepened into resentment; but he had been wounded far more deeply than that. Gilbert Fernande had stabbed with no uncertain hand at his friendship, his genius, and his love. Was all this to remain unavenged?

As he asked himself the question, Paul Clerkwray's parting words were ringing in his ears. "Perhaps he will marry Constance Vivian, after all. The Devil is generous, and gold is strong."

Why should he refuse this brilliant opportunity of retaliation? Ninety-nine men out of a hundred thought his views of honour strained and transcendental, and even judged

by that standard, plausible defensive arguments were not hard to find. Legally there could be no doubt of his rights, and even if the matter were regarded from a moral aspect, was it not true that the money would have been his but for calumny; that a traitor was a kind of moral outlaw, unworthy of the high consideration due to honourable men; that the latest act of his father's life had evinced his unfulfilled intention to cancel the past?

Sophistry is always easy when inclination is strong; and considerations of this kind crowded upon him, but his intellect was too bright and vigorous for such ignoble defeat as this, and he broke them all as a giant snaps fetters of untried metal.

"I will not cheat myself with lies," he thought. "The thing is wrong; but am I strong enough to resist the bribe?"

It was a hard question, and he knew that whether the issue were defeat or victory, the struggle would be long. Few men prized

money less than he—if he erred at all it was in undervaluing it; but the temptation struck a far deeper root than that. Generally when two courses lie before us, each has something of gladness and something of sorrow. It was not so here. One path seemed bright as morning—the other dark as death.

If he took the rough road, to what goal did it lead? To mechanical drudgery, which would have tired even the dull spirits of habitual plodders; to continual dreariness; to a lonely death, for he knew that the strain of work was killing him, and his strength was failing fast.

The manuscript of his unfinished epic lay near him, as if to remind him of the supreme power of genius—to create a dream-world of its own; but he turned from it with an impatience he had never felt before. Of what use was this protracted toil of heart and brain? Great thoughts lost their strength and beauty when they became mere words, as a love song loses its grace and melody

when translated into a barbaric tongue. The history of every true artist's work is a chronicle of high ideals, and, what seem to him, poor and unworthy attainments; and if this were not discouragement enough, the world's reception of earnest work—its coldness, its narrow perceptions, and its shallow misjudgment would supply the rest.

In the poet's nature the dominant worship is beauty, and unless this is counterbalanced in a very remarkable degree by other faculties, its companions are an undue hatred of dulness, a sensuous love of ease, and a distaste for mere routine.

The habit of Edward's life had been to subdue these traits by sheer force of iron resolution; but Paul Clerkwray's words had called them into prominence, as the sound of the bugle re-awakens an old soldier's instinct for war.

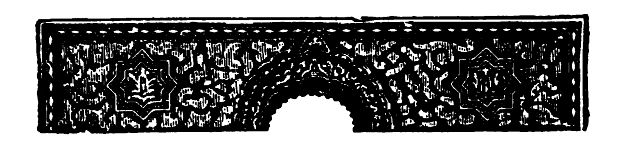
Why should he die young, when rest and indolent happiness might make possible the gay dream-life of many years? In Italy, or.

some fair island of the sunny south, what would the fierce fights of faction, the jarring strife of creeds, the intrigue and the ambition of men, signify to him? Paul Clerkwray had said Constance Vivian loved him; he had never admitted that to himself, but he knew she was not indifferent to him; and her hand did not seem a hopeless prize if he could ask her to share wealth and ease instead of poverty and toil.

This was the strongest consideration of all, and he could see nothing clearly but this enchanted dream-paradise with her. Wealth and rest, happiness and love—all these might be his; and all that was to be accomplished to attain them was, by a few words, to wrest the ill-gotten gold from a traitor's hands.

The hour he had asked to arrive at a decision passed by, and he still sat silent and motionless, fighting the battle out alone. At last he heard the sound of a quick footstep.

He looked up and saw—not Paul Clerkwray—but Gilbert Fernande.



CHAPTER XV.

NEMESIS.

HEAVEN'S messengers assume strange forms sometimes. The appearance of the man who had wronged him, ended the struggle in Edward's mind. He could not look at his cousin's face—remembering past companionship and old affection—without sorrow, and this cannot long co-exist with the desire for revenge. Besides, he felt he would have no right to be indignant if he could himself stoop to dishonour. He uttered no word of reproach, but waited silently for the other to speak first.

"How are you, old fellow?" said Gilbert, lightly. "I have been worried out of my life all day by dull people, so I have come here to

be reminded that there is such a thing as intellect in the world."

He took off his gloves as he spoke, and threw himself into the most comfortable chair, with the easy familiarity of a visitor who knows he is always welcome.

"I often envy you, Edward," he continued, "for there's nothing so dull as commerce. Law, you will say, is not much better, but when you are writing, you have the world at your feet."

He waited a few moments for some word of reply, but received none.

"Of course," he resumed, "your Eden has a serpent in it, and a critic may sting you now and then, like the writers of those monstrously unfair reviews on your last book. But it must be a delightful thing to escape from this grimy City life to a world where one is king over 'fair women and brave men.'"

Still Edward did not speak, and Gilbert looked at him with a sudden sense of vague suspicion.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "You are very pale, and you have not said a word to me—even of greeting. Are you ill?"

Edward controlled his voice by a strong effort, and replied, quietly—

"I have made a discovery to-night—that is all."

"What is it?"

Edward silently passed him the papers Paul Clerkwray had left behind, in proof of the truth of his story. No word of comment was necessary; the chain of evidence had not a single missing link. Gilbert's face grew pale as he read; a traitor never sees his own conduct in its true light till he is found out and despised by others. Then he often finds it hard to escape from the contagion of the universal contempt.

"Do you deny anything?" said Edward, at last.

"No, I deny nothing," said Gilbert, who saw that evasion was useless, and was determined to take a bold stand. "You would

not believe me if I did. You, or your friends, must have played the spy to get this case together—scarcely the conduct of an honourable gentleman, I should have thought. However, you have done it, and your charges are true. What of that?"

"Why have you hated me?"

Gilbert Fernande confronted him fiercely as a wild beast at bay turns upon his pursuers.

"Why should there be any reason for love or hate? You are a fool. Do you remember what Shylock said about the merchant? That he hated him 'because it was his humour.'"

"Had you no reason, then?"

"I have hated you from a boy. You have always flung me in the shade. No matter for that; we know each other now. Have you anything more to say?"

"No, except this. We part for ever to-night; if the time ever comes when you care for my forgiveness, you may be assured that it is yours."

This was the only thing needed to complete

Gilbert's humiliation. In spite of himself, he felt that the man he had wronged was great, while he was contemptible and mean. But this stung him into anger—not into regret. He tried to laugh contemptuously, as he replied—

"Forgiveness is easy when revenge is impossible. It is mere cant for you to talk in this virtuous strain. You know perfectly well you would crush me if you could."

Edward did not retaliate, and Gilbert turned to go.

But at the door he encountered Paul Clerkwray, who had returned for Edward's decision with regard to the will.

"So this is your spy?" said Gilbert, pausing for a moment. "I have noticed this fellow several times before, but I didn't know he was watching me. It would be a pity to disturb your conversation, so I'll leave you, with the hope that next time you get up a little conspiracy, you may be more successful."

But Paul Clerkwray stood in the doorway,

rendering it impossible for him to pass. The careless contempt stirred all the resentment that had smouldered so long into flame. He could restrain his impatience no longer, but said, fiercely—

"I *have* been watching you. Do you fancy I have failed?"

"I should be sorry to discourage your zeal, which seems great for your age; but if your work is not failure, it is something very much like it. You have brought your master some information, certainly, but I should like to know what use he can make of it?"

"He can take every penny you possess from you, and send you out into the world a dishonoured bankrupt. Is that 'use' enough? He can do *that*—and he will."

"This is mere foolery of the idlest kind. You will not frighten me by vague threats like that."

"Are my threats vague? I will speak plainer, then. You inherited your fortune from the late John Claridas?"

"Quite true."

"A later will of his has been found, leaving everything to his son."

"It's a lie; there was such a will, I know, but it was destroyed."

"Was it? Look at this, then."

Paul Clerkwray produced the stolen will for Gilbert's inspection, taking good care not to let it go out of his hands. Gilbert scrutinised it narrowly in the hope of finding a flaw which would render it illegal, but in vain. The signatures were all genuine, and the language of the will was too clear and simple to admit of any evasion.

He turned to Edward, when he had finished his examination of the document, to play his last card.

"If this will is genuine, and it seems so, you have won the game. Your father meant to have destroyed it, and the lawyers, who led him to believe that he had done so, must either have been knaves or fools. It's no use talking of that though, for of course the law

wont recognise a man's unfulfilled intentions. You said you had no wish to crush me; I will put your words to the test. If a respectable firm of solicitors should pronounce that will genuine, will you be content with three-fourths of the estate, if I yield the money up without putting you to the expense and delay of litigation?"

"I will not enter into any compromise, because—"

"I said so. You men of genius are as shrewd in looking after your own interests as other men. This is not revenge, but justice, I suppose?"

"You mistake my meaning. I refuse your compromise, because I am convinced with you that my father meant to destroy that will. Mr. Clerkwray, I promised you my decision. It is to have nothing whatever to do with this discovery."

There was no misunderstanding the firmness of the words. Paul Clerkwray muttered an impatient oath of disappointment, but did

not attempt persuasion. Gilbert seemed utterly bewildered. It was not only that he was astonished at this great renunciation, but that he was quite incapable of understanding it.

"You will claim nothing?" he repeated, incredulously.

"Nothing."

"Then why did you set this man to find out all about me?"

"He did not set me to work. I have found out all this for my own sake. *I* am not made of forgiving stuff, and you have wronged me, too."

"You! I do not even know your name."

"I will tell it you when the work that should have been completed to-night is done."

In spite of his freedom from superstition, Gilbert could not help dreading this strange man, who had brought so many of his secrets to the light, as though he had been gifted with some infernal power, and who spoke so con-

fidently of his final triumph. But Paul Clerkwray left the house without another word, and Gilbert only waited to hear any reproach that Edward might think well to utter. There was none, however, and he soon left him alone—with what strange medley of shame, regret, unwilling reverence for the man who could forgive a great wrong, and suffer deeply rather than be guilty of a comparatively small one himself, and selfish congratulation at having escaped so easily, it would be hard indeed to say.

So Edward refused the opportunity offered to him of exchanging drudgery and poverty, for wealth and ease with the woman he loved. It was a great renunciation, for it meant not only all the brightness and glitter of life, but life itself. If the world were constructed as many of our popular theologians are fond of describing it, some great compensating joy would have been given him. He looked for none, but resumed his quiet unheeded work, with no vain regret that he had chosen the

sterner life-course and abandoned the sensuous dream for ever.

He never expected to see either Gilbert Fernande or Paul Clerkwray again, but one night in January, about two months later, the latter entered his room once more.

He looked weary and exhausted, but there was a triumph in his face that could not be mistaken.

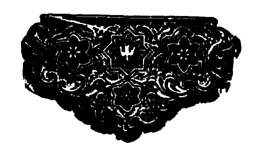
"Have you heard the news?" he inquired eagerly.

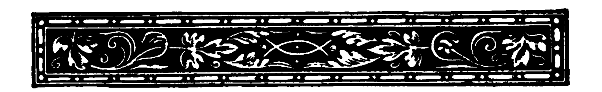
"What news?"

Paul Clerkwray took from his pocket a copy of one of the evening papers and pointed to a paragraph, which ran thus:—

"Many of our readers will notice with regret that the list of bankrupts, which we publish in another column, is headed by the name of Messrs. Claridas and Co. This firm has for nearly a century enjoyed the highest reputation in commercial circles. We understand that Messrs. Claridas and Co. have

been obliged to suspend payment on account of the failure of the London, Edinburgh and Dublin Bank, by which Mr. Gilbert Fernande, the only surviving partner, was ruined. It is feared that the assets will be found insufficient to meet one-third of the liabilities, and Mr. Fernande is believed to have left the country."





CHAPTER XVI.

A WOMAN'S LOYALTY.

It was a bleak, cold night in March. All day the sharp winds had been moaning over the country as if to dispel earth's rosy dreams of the coming spring. The streets of London were all more or less deserted, and the few pedestrians, who were compelled to bear awhile the bitter discomfort of the cutting wind and the driving rain, hurried forward to the bright goal of home, doubtless with very enthusiastic anticipation of fireside enjoyment. In the houses of the rich, blazing fires were burning brightly, and the bitterness of the night without added another charm to jest and song, while in the wretched homes of the poor, consumptive hunger shivered by its empty grates, drawing its

rags closer together, and fancying that it heard in the voice of the wind the wail of an angel of death.

Even London Bridge, where the stream of human life flows always with so broad a current, was almost deserted, and as Edward Claridas hurried across it, he saw only one solitary creature there.

It was the figure of a woman still young. She was poorly clad, and the heavy rain fell upon her bare head, but she seemed unconscious of it, so absorbed was she in watching the course of the black river that flowed below.

Edward's footsteps did not disturb her, and he touched her lightly on the shoulder—

"So young, and alone, bareheaded on such a night as this?"

"Young!" she echoed bitterly, "I am old in crime and misery. What am I to you?"

He did not reply till he had taken his overcoat off and covered her shoulders with it; then he said quietly—

"You are a woman, and were pure once I suppose—anyway, there can be nothing for you in the streets on such a night as this but misery and death."

"Why have you put your coat round me?" she said, not softened by the action, but astonished at it. "You will feel the rain as well as I."

"I can bear it, but dressed as you are it will kill you."

"Will it? Then let me stay here. I dare not leap into the river, but I can die this way."

"You are talking madly. Let me take you home?"

She obeyed mechanically, mutely recognising that his will was stronger than her own. There was neither gratitude nor penitence in her manner at first, but after they had taken a few steps together, she took the warm coat off her shoulders and handed it back to him.

"Take this. It is *you* who are mad to risk your life for such a thing as I."

He saw that expostulation was useless, so did not waste time in unnecessary words.

"Let us come under the railway arch then," he said, "we shall both be sheltered there, and I think the storm is abating."

They stood sheltered in this way for some minutes in silence, then she said, apparently actuated by a sudden uncontrollable impulse—

"You said I was pure once—it was strange you should think that, for I am coarse and ugly now—but it was true for all that."

Where had he seen someone like this woman before? What had been only a vague impression, awakened by her face, became an absolute certainty when he heard her speak.

"You see what I am, and you can guess my story—but would you care to know why I am careless of the rain to-night?"

"Yes."

"Because he is dead, and I loved him; because I tried to save him and failed; be-

cause he was starving, and my help came too late."

Edward looked at her wonderingly. He had always held that human nature was of God not of the Devil—that something divine lingers in every heart for ever; but he was not prepared to find in this fallen and degraded creature a love as deep and true as the heart-worship of any maiden whispering a loved name in her innocent prayers to Heaven.

"They say he wronged me," she said, wildly. "It is false—I wronged him. I gave his name for vengeance to one who hated him. But he loved me once, and used to say my face was fair. . . . . . And when he was dying he kissed me, though I am ugly now, and I had wronged him—was there no nobleness in *that?*"

She continued without waiting for a reply—

"He had been very rich, but in some way he lost everything; I don't know how, but I think it must have been that my father

wronged him. If so, it was I who ruined him, for I set his enemy upon his track."

She uttered the last words like a despairing wail, her own misery and degradation being evidently for the moment quite forgotten.

"My father came and told me of his ruin exultantly, thinking I should triumph too. Then when I heard he was poor I knew that I loved him still—knew it now that it was too late."

She paused a moment to control her voice, for it trembled very much, and her tears were falling fast.

"I sought for him day and night, and at last I found him. He, who had been so rich and flattered, was dying in a wretched hovel, dying of hunger."

What was it about this woman that recalled some banished thought to his mind?

"He knew me, and let me nurse him, and give him what I had. I went without food myself to make it more, but it was little enough. And I prayed too—I who had not

prayed for years—that he might live. It was all useless. God heard nothing, and he died to-day. Why will you not let me die too?"

What could he say to comfort her? Beside any great sorrow, consolation seems always trite and impotent: to a reckless grief like this, it would have been almost an insult. He heard her without comment, and when she ended speaking, only the words, "Poor child," escaped from his lips.

By this time the rain had nearly ceased. They entered the Borough together, and she led him through the narrow bye streets, till at last in one of the foulest of the squalid courts, where Crime and Pestilence are bred and nurtured, she stopped before a wretched house.

He would have left her here, but she signed to him to follow, and led him into a room that was quite dark and silent.

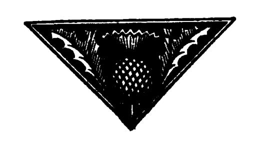
She struck a light, and he saw that the only furniture was a broken chair and a wooden

bedstead. The bed was covered by a ragged sheet.

"He died here," she said hoarsely, "he had many friends once, but when he was ruined they would have let him starve. See!"

With a touch as tender as a young mother's when she smooths the pillow of her sleeping babe, Janet Clerkwray—for it was she—removed the sheet from the face that lay concealed beneath.

And Edward recognised Gilbert Fernande, though his rigid features were cold and pale in death.





CHAPTER XVII.

GRACEVILLE.

If Mrs. Vivian had confined her studies to pamphlets on the liver, she might have been blessed for many years with the double enjoyment of excellent health, and the belief that she was a great sufferer. But in an evil hour for the peace of her household, she commenced the perusal of some theological works.

Such was the fascination of this new literature, that even her pet doctors were soon eclipsed by her pet divines. Throughout the winter, Mrs. Vivian was engaged in the perusal of ponderous prophetic volumes with dingy covers, which agreed in nothing except the depressing conviction, that the most uncom-

fortable future was in store for the world. In vain her husband protested, and Constance tried to persuade; Mrs. Vivian persevered with her agreeable occupation, with the intensified zeal always inspired by the sense of slow martyrdom. A prophetess was "not without honour, save in her own country." Constance might laugh, no doubt people had laughed at Noah before the Deluge, but the time would come when she would be sorry, and wish she had taken her mother's advice.

It was not surprising that after indulging for some time in this train of thought Mrs. Vivian became seriously ill. The physician, who for many years had humoured her whims and pocketed her guineas, began to look really grave, and advised complete change of air and scene. Mrs. Vivian could not be induced to leave her home. On the twentieth of December, she informed those who urged her to do so, a star was to fall and demolish the Vatican, to the intense gratification of all Protestant Churches—she could not be away

from England at such a time. If they doubted the truth of her words, let them read the book from which she herself had learned the fact.

As the little work in question contained nine hundred and eighty three closely printed pages, no one was bold enough to investigate the matter, and Mrs. Vivian carried her point in triumph. The star, however, failed to keep its appointment, and the doctor still advising change for that suffering lady, she was obliged to have recourse to another expedient. She admitted that the first prophet had been mistaken, but what of that? Another reverend gentleman had written a still longer work, a little hazy in its teaching, it is true, but its general effect was confidently believed by his admirers to be that a comet, quite overlooked by the astronomers, would suddenly appear and take strange liberties with the sun, on February the fourth ; general incredulity was expressed concerning the comet, but this further delay was agreed to not-

withstanding. The comet thought better of it apparently, for it failed to put in an appearance at all.

"We have had enough of this nonsense about stars and comets, Maria," said her husband, with an impatience not altogether unnatural. "You had better come with me to France or Italy next week. It really is time you had a change. You groaned so loudly last night that I couldn't get an hour's sleep."

"If you suffered as much as I do, James, *you'd* groan, and as for going away, what's the good of that when the world is coming to an end on the first of May?"

It is to be hoped the recording angels wept over Mr. Vivian's reply, for it stood in more urgent need of an erasing tear, than any observation of Uncle Toby's.

"Confound the world," he said, after a few minutes' thought had partly restored his self-possession, "we've really had too much of this sort of thing already, Maria."

"If the world doesn't come to an end on the first of May, James," was his wife's rejoinder, "I'll really go away with you, and what's more, I'll never read one of the books you dislike again, but we shall see who's right when the time comes!"

The prospect of getting rid of the obnoxious books for ever was so delightful that Mr. Vivian accepted the compromise, and agreed to remain in London till the first week in May.

But the fatal week came and went with nothing at all unusual to make it memorable, so Mrs. Vivian renounced prophecy, and agreed to go with her husband for a few months upon the Continent.

"They leave London on the tenth," said Constance to Lionel, to whom she had been describing the delays and their cause.

"Why don't you say '*we*' instead of *they*?"

"Because I'm not going."

"Not going?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I would go if I could be of any use, but I can't, and it would be very dull."

"Worse than being alone in your great house in London?"

"Yes, for if I went with them I should have to meet ever so many people I don't like."

"Then you are quite determined about it, dear?"

"Quite."

"But you will be so lonely, Constance, without a companion."

"No companions are better than dull companions; besides, I mean to be often with you, Uncle Lionel."

Lionel hesitated, for a new idea had occurred to him. He had thought of going away to a quiet little village by the sea for the next two months. Should he ask her to come with him? It would be dull for her, doubtless; but would it be worse than being quite alone?

"I am probably going away too," he said.

Constance looked disappointed.

"Where are you going, Uncle Lionel?"

"To Graceville. It is a sleepy little village; but the scenery round is very beautiful, and I believe it is the only place in England that has scarcely altered since I was a boy. You would be tired of it in a week, and it would be absurd to ask you to endure the companionship of an old man, or else—or else—"

Constance looked up into his face with a new light in her eyes.

"Would you really like me to come, Uncle Lionel?"

"Of course I should, darling; to have my beautiful niece continually near me would be like entering a new world. But it's gross selfishness in me even to think of it."

"On the contrary," said Constance, gaily, "I should like it above everything. You know I always enjoy being with you, and you forget Graceville would be a new world to me, too."

"A very dull one."

"Not at all. I should bathe—and come home with floating hair like a Naiad."

"No Naiad ever had such beautiful hair."

"Thank you; I shall become unbearably vain if you pay me so many compliments. Then I mean to make friends of village children, and an impression on the hearts of the ploughboys; I shall have long conversations with you, till I astonish you with my wisdom; I shall wander through the woods till I grow learned in botany; I shall ruin my complexion, and forget that I was ever at such a thing as a ball or a dinner party in my life."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Of course I am, if you are."

"Are you sure your father will not object?"

"On the contrary, he will be glad. He has ceased to trust me alone, and I think is not quite free from misgivings that what he calls my 'sentimentality' will induce me to

turn the drawing-room into a Home for the Destitute, and the library into a reading-room for working men."

So the arrangement was made accordingly, to their mutual satisfaction. On the tenth of May Mr. Vivian and his wife started for France, while Constance and Lionel went on the same day to Graceville.





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FINISHED EPIC.

One evening early in June, Edward Claridas sat alone, writing the concluding words of his greatest poem.

During the last week, imagination had had absolute dominion over him with the force and passion of inspiration. He had worked day and night, great thoughts crowding on his mind, so that expression of their strength and beauty to the world, became a necessity. He had scarcely paused for rest or food, while his graceful fancies became music—his lofty conceptions bold and burning words.

And yet he knew the struggle was nearly over; his strength had been failing steadily

—in a little while he felt his energy must be subdued, and heart and brain be still for evermore.

He had long foreseen this; but his hand did not tremble as he wrote. There was even a smile upon his face as he finished the last line, and laid down his pen with the sense of a life-dream's fulfilment.

Yes—the ambition of his life was accomplished. The work would never be popular —he knew that—and what laurels it would win could only be cast upon his grave. But what did that matter if the work were true and great? and he knew it to be both. It fell far short of his ideal; he knew he carried within his mind, powers which future years might have unfolded into far higher achievement than this. But what he had done bore the stamp of genius, and that was enough.

He had parted with the copyright for less than a well written essay in a magazine would obtain. The epic was quite an obsolete form of composition, his publishers told

him, and the demand was certain to be small. What a pity it was that Mr. Claridas should waste his genius on such unprofitable efforts as this!

His life had been one protracted struggle with adverse influences, that would have crushed a weaker man. His dauntless will had conquered them all, and never with such fearless strength as now, when he felt his life ebbing from him like a receding tide. No passage in his epic was so powerful as its conclusion—no conception so lofty as the closing thoughts upon the destiny of humanity—uttering the confident belief in the time when the dreams of science and knowledge should become realities, and the heroic struggles of the past yield an abundant harvest for the coming age to reap.

And he struck a deeper note of triumph yet—of faith in the dawning of an eternal hereafter, when life's problems will at last be solved, when the materialistic faithlessness that has degraded men, and the false creeds

of bigotry that have crushed them, shall be swept away like creeping mists before the benignant light of love.

But when he had ended, and the poet—king of an ideal world—became a man with individual aims and passions, a great longing sprang up in his heart. Could he not see the woman he loved a moment before he died? He would not speak to her lest he should betray the secret he had hidden so completely, and cast thereby the faintest shadow upon her life. He would not give her the opportunity of seeing him; but why should he deny himself this last indulgence—one farewell glimpse of the queenly beauty that was always present to his dreaming fancy?

He knew Constance was at Graceville—if he started at once he would catch the last train, which arrived there about eleven o'clock; he would stay at a little inn, near the cottage Lionel had taken, and trust to the course of events to give him the oppor-

tunity he sought. In so small a place he was not likely to have much difficulty in seeing her unobserved.

His head was throbbing with acute pain, and he knew he was far too ill to travel with any degree of safety; but he felt certain he should live to accomplish his purpose, as wounded men are confident in the strength that will sustain them, until they have delivered the triumphant tidings of victory.

The long, tedious journey was not enlivened by the conversation of his fellow-passengers. Some occult law governs railway journeys; for delay is certain when speed is desired, and irritating friendliness associated with the tendency to enter into long arguments, is prevalent when we long for quiet. At last, however, the slow train reached the quiet little station of Graceville, at which Edward was the only passenger to alight.

The moment he stood upon the platform he saw Lionel making some inquiries of a sleepy official, who appeared to resent his con-

versation as an uncalled for liberty. Edward would rather not have been recognised, and stepped hastily aside, but Lionel had already seen him, and ran forward with a quick word of surprise and pleasure.

"You here, Edward. Well I am surprised."

"Did you expect me, Mr. Vivian?"

"I—of course not."

"Then why are you here?"

"I was expecting a parcel from London, which they seem to have lost. The guard says he saw it, and thinks it's gone to Gravesend. He seems quite offended that I am not altogether satisfied with this arrangement; but never mind, it's worth losing a thousand parcels to see you. Come along."

"I was going to the inn."

"Nonsense," said Lionel, "I have just the room for you if you don't mind a cottage. Such a view too from the window—you'd think you were a thousand miles at least from Chancery Lane or Westminster Hall."

"You are very kind, Mr. Vivian, as you always are, but I cannot come."

Lionel looked into his face with astonishment at this persistent refusal; they were standing together in the lamp light now, and he saw for the first time the change in it.

"Good God," he exclaimed, with sudden fear, "is anything the matter? You look terribly pale and—"

"Nothing is the matter, but I have been working too hard lately, and I am fatigued by this long journey."

"It was madness of you to travel in the state you are in."

"I know it, but I must see *her* again."

"Constance?"

"Yes."

Lionel understood.

"You must come home with me," he said, with unwonted firmness. "Did you bring any luggage?"

"Only the bag I carry in my hand."

Lionel took it from him silently.

"Are you strong enough to walk a hundred yards?" he said, anxiously.

"Yes, if you will give me your arm. I am a little dizzy—that is all. The fresh air will soon revive me."

At the door he said—

"*She* must not know of my being here. I can see her without that."

"She shall not unless you wish it. Come in."

They entered softly; Lionel having first ascertained that Constance had gone to bed.

"You will eat something, Edward?" he said, trying to hide his anxiety.

"No, thank you, Mr. Vivian."

"Do lad, to please me."

Edward yielded, though it cost him a great effort to do so, and contrived to eat something, hardly knowing what it was.

"I will not press you to take more now," said Lionel, seeing it was useless, "but a few days in Graceville will give you the appetite of a farmer. You are fatigued now, dear

boy, so I will not weary you with talking. Good night. We can discuss matters quietly in the morning. Constance always goes out for a long walk before breakfast."

That night Edward had what had become very unusual to him—two hours' dreamless sleep. He awoke refreshed, it was very early, but he had noticed the night before that the room faced the east, and he determined to watch the sun rise.

He dressed leisurely, and sat beside the open window with a quiet enjoyment of the morning air.

Gradually the dawning light stole over hill and valley, and showed the serene beauty of a perfect English landscape. Grassy uplands and shaded vales, scattered farm-houses and farms rich in their many tints of varied produce, woody glens with here and there a gleam of the fairy rivulet that laughed and sparkled in the sun. It was not one of the scenes that awaken the loftiest emotions of the heart, hushing the spirit into a sense of littleness

beside the mysterious greatness of nature; it was simply glad and beautiful, the incessant murmur of the sea alone suggesting the existence of passion.

Edward watched it all with many strange and conflicting thoughts. How hard it was to leave so fair a world. When life is old, and the friends whom we have loved are dead, or have forgotten us; when ambition has been constantly thwarted, and all our dreams have been thrown like shapeless ruins at our feet by the tide of time, existence has few charms, but it is hard to die in the days when passion is still strong, when the mind has the power of genius, and the heart the force of love.

As the village church clock struck six, Edward heard the sound first of a light footstep that he knew well, and then the sound of the door below opening.

Would she walk by the sea or in the country? If she chose the latter he would see her from his window, and the purpose with which he had come to Graceville would be accomplished.

She chose the woods, and little dreaming who was watching her, passed slowly down the little garden before him.

She had never looked so beautiful, he thought, as then; the querulous discontent which had marred the loveliness of her face was rarely seen there now, and as the sunshine floated on her golden hair, and the light breeze tinged her cheek with a faint flush, a duller imagination than a poet's might have fancied that earth grew brighter as she passed.

A bird was singing high over her head. She looked up and Edward noticed that her dark eyes, always dreamy, had a light in them that seemed wistful—almost sad. No detail of her appearance escaped him, he noticed every flutter of her simple white dress, relieved by no ornament save the wild rose at her breast.

So he watched her till she entered the little wood, and the clustering trees hid her from his sight.

"I have seen her for the last time," he

said firmly, "I must not stay here any longer. I dare not trust myself to speak to her."

He went into the room below, but Lionel had not yet risen. He paced up and down the room, the thoughts of what he had been watching throbbing through his mind, so that he felt constrained to relieve them by throwing them into words.

Writing materials were lying on a side table. He sat down and wrote rapidly—without stopping to trim the verses, or suppress the irregularities almost inseparable from unstudied composition :—

Sweet with the burden of lovers' words breathed low in the starry hours,
A breeze of the early morn arose and played with the fair young flow'rs!
Like the distant echo of angels' song on the dreaming earth it fell,
But to me it wailed in plaintive tone the words of a last farewell.

As I sat by the window opened wide, I heard the skylark sing,
Where only the fleecy clouds could feel the flutter of his wing,
While faintly borne on the languid air, in sound like mystic speech,
Was the backward sweep of the waves that break and die on the shingly beach.

I had watched the hills grow rosy at the slow approach of morn,
Till the red light crowned the changing waves and tinged the ripening corn,
And knew when once again the sun shall shine on yonder hill,
The long stern battle will be o'er, and this proud heart be still.

'Tis hard to lose the golden light; to part with bird and tree;
To see no more the summer stars nor hear the moaning sea;
For I have worshipped beauty with a love so deep and strong,
That earth grew fair as a woman's face and seemed to throb with song.

And harder yet to lose the dreams of laurels to be won,
Of great thoughts to be uttered and of great deeds to be done;
To lay down sword and armour when the bugle notes of strife,
Foretell the age that ushers in a grander form of life.

And yet I did not falter, for I knew there would arise
Others to sing a nobler strain, and gain a loftier prize;
For Truth shall find her heroes, and the league of Wrong and Might,
Must fail to hide from men the stars, or check the course of Right.

But as I mused, she came—my love—in starry lustre bright,
And my heart thrilled at the music of her footstep soft and light;
Could I lose the sense of her beauty—not knowing she was near?
And lie in silence, heeding not her voice so low and clear?

The sunlight fell on her long bright hair—the tall trees watched her pass,
And envied the touch of her dainty feet as she walked through the waving grass;
And methought I heard a moss rose pray to the wind which hurried by,
That its scattered leaves might touch her lips—then sink on her breast and die.

And so, not dreaming of my love, she vanished through the trees,
Still followed by the lingering touch of sunbeam and of breeze;
And with her seemed to pass away all that had been so fair,
Leaving me lonely—and the world all desolate and bare.

I would not shadow thy life, dear heart, for all that earth could give;
For if thy face were clouded, it were scarce worth while to live;
Yet dearer to me than a monarch's wealth or a nation's hoarded gain,
Is this fleeting moment of mute farewell—of blended joy and pain.

As Edward wrote the last words, the door opened; he looked up with a smile of greeting, expecting to see Lionel.

It was not he, but Constance Vivian.

She came forward with an unaffected expression of pleasure and surprise.

"I thought you were in London, Mr. Claridas. When did you come here?"

"Last night."

"Last night! And yet Uncle Lionel never told me you were coming!"

"He did not know of my intention—I did not know of it myself till yesterday."

The surprise in her face deepened; but she had no further opportunity to pursue the subject, even if she had wished to do so, for Edward said instantly—

"What beautiful flowers! Have you gathered them all this morning?"

"Yes; are they not wonderful? We London girls get all sorts of barbarous notions about flowers—as though they were good for nothing but to wear in a ball-room. I wish I were not so ignorant of botany. I suppose you know the names of all of them?"

"Of most of them, I think."

"I wish you would tell me all about them."

"I will tell you all I know, Miss Vivian, with pleasure, if you will promise to tell me when the lecture bores you."

He took one of the flowers as he spoke, and began talking about it with the accurate learning of a scholar, and the graceful fancy of a poet, but without the faintest touch of pedantry or affectation—he seemed to have

lost all thought of himself in the presence of the wild flowers' loveliness.

But when Constance, fascinated by his words, looked intently into his face, she saw at once how haggard and pale it was, as Lionel had done before.

"Stay," she cried; "you are concealing something, Mr. Claridas. Your face is so white and weary—you must be ill."

Would his long determination to hide his secret fail after all? He answered wearily—

"I have been working rather too hard lately—it is not worthy of your thought for a moment. Have I wearied you, or would you care to hear anything more about this flower?"

She would not be silenced in this way. She, who had loved him so long, had always thought of him as being so far removed from her by his strength and intellect, as to make the dream of her being anything more to him than a friend, a presumptuous folly. But a friend—or even an acquaintance—may offer

sympathy in the moments of a great sorrow, and she said anxiously—

"Forgive me, but your face belies your words—I am certain you are ill. Have you been like this long?"

He could not evade the questioning of her earnest eyes. After all, what feeling deeper than womanly compassion would the knowledge of the truth awaken in her heart? He answered after a brief silence—

"I have been like this only a few days; but I have foreseen this for years."

"Foreseen what?"

There was another pause; then Constance heard the quietly spoken reply—clear, calm, and unhesitating—

"That my work finished, my life itself would soon be over."

"Over—oh God, no!"

The words were wrung from her, as a cry of intense pain might have been, had her delicate limbs been tortured by the rack.

Their wailing tone of utter misery told the

whole story of her love plainer than any deliberate words could have done. She felt that, and sitting down, buried her face in her hands with shame. Had life depended on her silence she could not have suppressed that wailing cry—yet she fancied it unmaidenly, for it confessed her love for one who had never cared for her.

He was scarcely less agitated than she.

"Is it so much to you as this?" he murmured.

She rose now and looked into his face—her dark eyes luminous with worship and pride, as well as tears.

"Why should I be ashamed to have betrayed my love?" she said proudly. "You care nothing for me, I know; but at moments like this conventional reserve is impossible. I am *not* ashamed of loving you—I glory in it. You have the greatness of genius, and your thoughts will rule the world years hence. Is it no honour to love, even without return, knowing that?"

Disguise between them was over for ever now.

"Spare me this—for I love you. Spare me the pain of knowing that I have brought sorrow to you."

She trembled at the rush of conflicting feelings, in which triumph was the dominant impulse, as an exiled princess might tremble hearing that her dreams, long thought hopeless, were at last to be fulfilled—that an undisputed throne might now be hers.

"There can be no sorrow for me," she said, dashing away her tears, "comparable to the triumph of being loved by you. If you love me nothing shall separate us—if you are dying, your head shall rest upon my heart—if you were dead, earth would have no place so sacred to me as your grave."

He did not answer her in words, but their lips met in a long, lingering kiss of plighted troth.

They sat down side by side, but neither spoke. When Edward at last broke the

silence it was with a request that seemed trivial enough at such a time.

"Let your bright hair down, darling, that I may see how beautiful my queen is."

"Do you care for that?" she said, smiling through her tears at his words. "I am glad if I have any beauty, for your sake."

Her loosened tresses fell far below her waist. He touched them caressingly as they sat together clasped in a close embrace. They remained thus, with hearts too full to speak, a long while, doubtless, though the time seemed short. Then he said faintly—

"Heaven's for ever will be long enough, Constance, even for love."

They kissed each other once more, as parting lovers mutely vowing heart loyalty by the touching of their lips, then he laid his head upon her breast and seemed to sleep.

Her hair fell round him in showers of careless beauty, so near his lips that it trembled with every breath he drew. She

could not move it without disturbing him, and she watched it with aching eyes—a vague feeling of dread creeping over her heart as she saw how faint its motion was.

How still he lay, nothing broke the silence of the room, not even the sound of his breathing. . . . The hand which held her own was very cold. . . . The motion of her hair was fainter.

Had it ceased altogether?

Should she call for help or remain quiet lest her voice should disturb him? A great fear had arisen in her mind; with the courage of despair she placed her hand lightly on his heart.

Hope is vain, Constance, only Death could keep that heart from thrilling at thy touch.

Edward Claridas had died nobly, as he had lived, with his head resting on the bosom of the woman who loved him.



CHAPTER XIX.

FOR EVER.

"WHAT are you reading, Emmy?"

She showed her husband the book, it was the epic poem written by Edward Claridas.

Guy was silent for some time, then he said thoughtfully—

"Five years to-day, Emmy, since he died. The world is beginning to recognise his greatness now."

"Yes, the world of thinkers; but his writings will never be popular."

"They will have a higher destiny than that —they will be immortal. Come into my studio, I have two pictures to show you."

"Your own?"

"Yes, I painted one of them years ago.

The other is my latest work, which I would not let you see till it was finished."

It was the only picture he had ever painted concerning which he had made this rule, and Emily was very anxious to see it. Directly she entered the untidy studio she saw the curtain which concealed the work, and was about to throw it aside, when Guy stopped her.

"Look at the other picture first; we talked about it the first night we met."

It was the painting he had called "Friendship," a faithful representation of what he had fancied Constance to be in the days when he had seen her first.

"Won't you let it go out into the world again, Guy? It has been so much admired."

"No, it is weak and false. Look at the new one now. It is better than anything I have done yet—it is greater than anything I shall ever do."

It was an old idea treated by no mere copyist's hand. The principal figure in this

painting also was Constance. It represented her caressing a war horse on which her hair fell in a stream of golden light. Guy had not over estimated the worth of the picture; his other works merely indicated talent, but this was the perfectly accomplished conception of genius. The faultless loveliness of the heroine's figure, the prostrate form of the armour-clad knight lying slain on the soft green turf at her feet, the strength and beauty of the wounded horse were all perfectly portrayed, the work was not marred by one false line, or by a single faulty tint.

But the crowning beauty lay in the maiden's face. The regularity of the perfect features, the dreamy lustre of the large dark eyes, and the faint flush on the tear-stained cheek, all this he had depicted with almost equal fidelity before. But only genius could have copied the expression thus, till the dull canvas seemed a living thing. Sorrow and remembrance, love and loyalty, it blended all these; and clearer than all could be read her triumph in

his achieved greatness, her womanly pride in the knowledge of his love.

The whole story was written in her face—that he had fought for her sake, that he had conquered, but had only lived to lay his laurels at her feet.

Emily looked at the painting till her eyes grew dim with tears.

"It is very great," she said simply. "What do you call it?"

And Guy answered—

"I have named it—'Victory!'"

* * * * *

The sunlight of early morning is bright on the fair landscape, surrounding the little village of Graceville. It falls on wood and glen, on upland and rivulet, on the broad ocean which changes always, yet is the same for ever, hurrying on its unchecked course, with no thought or care for the restless farce and tragedy of human life.

The village still seems asleep, so few of its

inhabitants have begun their round of daily duties, but in the little churchyard the sunshine falls upon the kneeling figure of a woman, still young, and beautiful as a sculptor's dream. It is Constance Vivian, who has come here in the early morning to leave a white rose on her lover's grave.

Sorrow has given her beauty the one charm it lacked, the steadfast worship of loyal truth. In the fashionable circles of London society her fair face is rarely seen now, though homage has been offered her many times; but such women as she love once only in a life time.

And is this El Dorado? This world of loneliness, of broken hope, of ruined dreams—over which broods the dark shadow of death?

Perhaps this *is* El Dorado after all, the only ideal life possible to men and women whose hearts are heroic and strong. The age wails over its sorrow like a fretful child. Our current literature is for ever crying for a painless existence, for a life in which battle,

toil and disappointment shall have no place, and our popular theology, by its continual appeals to self interest, is framed to meet the same demand.

But this feverish thirst for happiness, is after all a weak and childish thing. Only when they have abandoned it, and their ideal aspiration is for greatness, do men and women begin to live at all.

For fools can dream away the hours in a sensual paradise, but the hero's life is a continual battle with the manifold forms of wrong, his onward course of triumph, through difficulty, danger, and desolation. This is stern and sorrowful, you say. It seems so, but few who have loved, thought, or worked nobly, have found life anything else.

Yet if existence were one long sense of pain, it would still be worth having, for the sake of its possibility to achieve.

For wherever love and greatness are, *there* is El Dorado.

And so we leave Constance at the grave, deeming herself rich in the remembrance of an hour's tenderness, and waiting for the re-union of a fairer golden city than Manoa—where our lost ideals will be attained to, and our broken dreams fulfilled; where the floral crown of love is thornless for evermore.

THE END.

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